

Not Reading Modernism

Historians write histories from established stories, artefacts, and shreds of evidence, often finding themselves at the mercy of what remains. In her artwork, Fernanda Fragateiro re-examines these same historical remnants, from archives to discarded materials, rewriting stories as she transforms artefacts into sculptures. Gathering her materials from a variety of sources, some of which come to her purely by accident, Fragateiro's encounters with cultural objects ignite the artist's curiosity and result in an exhaustive aesthetic and historical investigation that reintroduces a rich and overlooked segment of history to a contemporary audience. One can imagine objects stowed carefully under floorboards for decades, or in a lockbox for safekeeping, coming into Fragateiro's careful hands, where they are gingerly dusted off and carefully examined before becoming the fertile ground for research, imagination, and an aesthetic intervention that continues to bear the marks of its origin.

In the process of analysing and rediscovering a historical context, Fragateiro comes to embody it in her sculptures, reiterating and modifying its aesthetics as she suggests alterations to its history. It is this strategy that forms the basis for several pieces in *Bildraum*, her series of work from 2009-10: that draws on the work and biography of the German designer and architect Lilly Reich (1885-1947). Trained as an embroiderer, Lilly Reich worked for the Wiener Werkstätte and the Deutsche Werkbund, two applied arts collectives in Austria and Germany, prior to World War I. After scraping by as a seamstress during the war, in 1924 she moved to Frankfurt, where she worked as a trade-fair designer, and there met Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In addition to her own individual commissions, Reich collaborated with Mies on a number of projects between 1926 and 1937, including the design for the Café Samt und Seide (Velvet and Silk Café) in Berlin in 1927. In that design, Reich and Mies used differing lengths of black, orange, red, and yellow velvet and silk to partition and structure the space in the café, and furnished the divided areas with the tubular steel, cantilevered MR10 and MR20 chairs that Mies had recently designed. That same year, Reich and Mies also collaborated on the *Wohnraum in Spiegelglas* ("Living Room in Mirrored Glass") for the celebrated Deutsche Werkbund Weissenhof Settlement exhibition in Stuttgart. They later worked together on the International Exposition in Barcelona in 1929, a project that is considered central to Mies' professional development. In 1932, Mies invited Reich to

teach interior design at the Bauhaus. She was one of the only female instructors, but lost her position when Mies closed the Bauhaus under pressure from the Nazis the following year.

This personal and design history "intertwined inextricably with Mies", encompassing assistance and collaboration in overlapping venues and with similar styles 'has never been fully clarified. As Christiane Lange writes in *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe & Lilly Reich: Furniture and Interiors*, "they developed a common creative use of forms that they repeated and varied," but these designs have been attributed predominantly to Mies. Despite Reich's clear talent and documented accomplishments, her career was ultimately crippled by a series of unfortunate circumstances: the limited venues open to female architects and designers in the early years of modernism, restricted circumstances in Nazi Germany, and her complex relationship, both personal and professional, with Mies. Indeed, Mies did not do much to help: Lange writes, "As much as Mies was indebted to Reich for preserving much of his work from his time in Berlin, he contributed very little to securing her work or even making it known to the public" (Lange, 97).

Reich's story offers a potent set of tensions, both historical and aesthetic, that Fragateiro takes as her point of departure. In *MR10 Double Chair*, after Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich (2009), she refashions Mies' canonical MR10 chair, doubling its continuous tubular frame as if it were reflected in a mirror. The two opposite-facing seats are then bound together by a skein of silk, German-made Gütermann thread in shades of blue and grey. The Gütermann thread—a material associated with the traditionally female-dominated industries of textile design to which Reich was repeatedly relegated—runs through Reich's entire career trajectory, from her initial training as an industrial embroiderer and her work as a seamstress during World War I to her work in textile design at the Bauhaus. The taut threads around the steel tubes in *MR10 Double Chair* form a block of luminous color that is echoed in *(Not) Connecting #4* (2008), a nearly five-meter-long sculpture made with the full color spectrum of Gütermann's threads. In *(Not) Connecting #4*, the bright thread pulled taut between two wall-mounted brackets forms a minimalist color study: the solidity of the threads pulled tight transmute the materials—the "limp threads," as Anni Albers once bitterly characterized them—into a vibrant block of color that looks less like Fred Sandback's nearly invisible thread sculptures, recalling instead, and despite dramatic differences in material, Donald Judd's sleek chrome boxes. The visual transformation of the materials, from the "limp threads" representative of the unfortunately limited

realms of female design, weaves them, and Reich, into the modernist and minimalist canon.

The subordinate position that women like Reich held in the early years of modernism relates to a particularly poignant moment in Reich's life, when, at the beginning of the World War II after Mies emigrated to the U.S., she was charged with cataloguing and storing Mies' and her work in a safe place. Lange relates this story: The boxes [of Mies and Reich's work] were to be stored in a safe place for the duration of the war. Reich and her sole employee... carefully listed their contents. Over of [sic] the course of the next three years, she shipped the boxes one by one. There they remained unharmed. ... In 1963, some of the boxes were transported under difficult circumstances to Chicago. Mies never opened [the box labelled Lilly Reich]. Its contents were first sifted through in the 1980s, even though it had been transferred to the ownership of the Museum of Modern Art as early as 1969. (Lange, 97) Though MoMA organized a first show of Reich's work in 1996 as well as included her in a recent survey of the Bauhaus in 2009-10, Lange notes that Reich's materials, still housed at MoMA, have yet to be fully appraised (Lange, 23).

The process of cataloguing Mies' work for safekeeping is the subject of Fragateiro's *Wonder What's in THERE* (2010), a row of five black notebooks suspended on the wall, encased in acrylic supports. The piece, in which casings prop open four of them, allowing the viewer to read the contents of a single page, while another is shut and sealed by its acrylic support, is named after a comment made by one of the employees at Mies' Chicago office after the arrival of Reich's box was announced. On the open pages of the notebooks, Fragateiro has rewritten fragments of letters that Reich and others wrote concerning protecting Mies' work and, in particular, a letter from Reich detailing the destruction of her furniture designs and some of Mies' buildings by an Allied bombing raid in June 1943: "The air raids in the West have been very bad, and in Krefeld, almost everything that Mr. Mies or I once built has been destroyed." Reich's unopened archive-the secrets of its contents, the astonishment at why it has been neglected for so long, first by someone who owed so much to Reich, and then by art historians-is evoked by the one unopened notebook, blocked inexorably from view. *Wonder What's in THERE* investigates the archival process-the process of preserving objects, the story of their production and preservation-that precedes the writing of art history. By reproducing Reich's letters, *Wonder What's in THERE* accurately shows Reich in the thankless role of caretaker, and the heartbreak she suffered when her and Mies' projects were destroyed in World War II

bombings. Reinterpreting these shreds of history, Fragateiro's sculptures restructure and amend the existing narrative of Reich's and Mies' partnership: they tell Reich's story in a level of detail that has not been explored in most venues. Fragateiro's sculptures—including MR10 Double Chair; Recliner (after MvdR) (2009), a tubular steel multifunctional chair that Mies designed but never produced; and Wonder What's in THERE—thereby contribute to the historiography of her subjects by detailing their design collaborations and Reich's regrettably underrepresented role in the partnership.

At the same time as she examines Mies and Reich's collaborations, Fragateiro also transforms this history by intertwining her own works with it. Even as she embraces a historical methodology, Fragateiro muddles the art historical narrative and the production of knowledge by introducing objects of uncertain and hybrid origins that, in turn, highlight the uncertain provenance of Reich and Mies' designs. Wonder What's in THERE demonstrates Fragateiro's ability to channel Reich's style and persona to create new works of art. Acting as an amanuensis, Fragateiro painstakingly rewrites Lilly's letters by hand to resemble the block letters that Reich used to annotate her and Mies' designs. Similarly, the blocks of color painted on the notebook pages—black, orange, red, and lemon yellow—are the same colors as the velvet and silk that Reich and Mies used in their Café Samt und Seide. Throughout Bildraum, Fragateiro's re-evaluation of Reich's legacy adopts her precursor's simple, functional aesthetic: Fragateiro transforms herself into an apprentice that learns from the process and oeuvre of her master.

The production of knowledge and its aesthetic corollaries are likewise the subject of another group of works in Bildraum that concentrates on the book as a central node of knowledge production. Here, though, the book, associated with knowledge and cultural history and memory, does not circulate information. Rather, Fragateiro's book sculptures foreground the book's aesthetic casings; the historical or intellectual content comes after, if at all.

Explaining the process of making a series of sculptures, (Not) Reading Kursbuch 1 and (Not) Reading Kursbuch 2 (both 2009), Fragateiro writes of the Kursbuch volumes: I often go to the Goethe-Institut in Lisbon to look for second-hand books. [One] time they had an incomplete collection of Kursbuch magazines, with [its] beautiful design and colors. Despite my total lack of knowledge of the German language, I found a great intensity in those books and decided to do a piece with them.... [I] fell in love with the colors before

I knew the content. Later, I found out that this was an important publication, thematically linked to the May 1968 generation and the 1968 student movement in Berlin. Both the Kursbuch, which Fragateiro describes here, and Edition Suhrkamp, which is the subject of (Not) Reading Rainbow Colors, After Willy Fleckhaus, Suhrkamp Catalogue 1963, Edition Suhrkamp (2010), feature a similar graphic aesthetic and a range of vivid colors on their covers. Both were designed and published by the same press beginning in the early '60s at a time of cultural upheaval in Germany and were salient forums for leftist discourse. In 1963, the prestigious Suhrkamp Press introduced the Edition Suhrkamp to publish paperbacks of high-quality theoretical and literary texts. Initially sold for three deutsche marks, Edition Suhrkamp provided unprecedented access to Germany's intellectual and aesthetic history, particularly to German students, in a now-emblematic serial designed by Willy Fleckhaus. Also directed at students and leftist intellectuals, Kursbuch, founded in 1965, functioned as one of the important forums used by the 1968-generation student movement, the Außerparlamentarische Opposition (APO, or Extraparliamentary Opposition) to express and explore its ideas. The design of the books, especially the still-existing Edition Suhrkamp, has come to be symbolic of the 1968 generation.

Unable to understand the content of the Kursbuch or her collection of Edition Suhrkamp paperbacks, Fragateiro was drawn to them rather by their aesthetic qualities, playing off the historical design and content in a series of sculptures. Focused on the volumes as material objects, Fragateiro trimmed their edges and became fascinated with the result: "There is something accidental in the drawings produced by the cut of the books. There is a very pictorial, very visual image in these pieces, ... a haptic sense of the use of materials and colors," the artist wrote in an email in August 2010. In pieces such as (Not) Reading Kursbuch 2 and (Not) Reading Walter Benjamin (2009), another work incorporating found books, Fragateiro mounts the books on the wall in rows enclosed by brushed stainless steel casings that obscure their covers as well as their contents from view. The trimmed sides of each volume bear the mark of the black text printed on the inside, now visible on the edge of the page. These sculptures, with their sleek casings and inaccessible interiors, highlight an object's material qualities—the texture of the pages, the warmth of the book against the cool steel casing—as they obscure and refract semantic content.

In contrast with (Not) Reading Kursbuch 2 and (Not) Reading Walter Benjamin, which foreground the delicately speckled

edges of the cut volumes, other of Fragateiro's book sculptures burst with the colors of their covers. In a one-and-a-half-meter tall vertical tower of the leftist periodical Kursbuch, its titles obscured by a polished stainless steel support, Fragateiro (Not) Reading Kursbuch 1 juxtaposes the striking palette of each edition's monochrome paper spine and the more incrementally varied shades of white of the publication's pages, which have likewise been trimmed. The "drawings" on the edges of the books, as Fragateiro calls them, produce a graphite-like texture on the edge of the exposed pages and inject a soft, delicate counterpoint to the stack of bold monochrome spines, drawing a contrast between interior content and the designed exterior, mechanical production and the handmade gesture of cutting the volumes. Like the artist herself, without access to the knowledge printed inside, the viewer is left with the design and Fragateiro's alterations to it, suggesting that aesthetics, even when it encases radical ideas, outlasts rhetoric.

Fragateiro amplifies this effect in a final sculpture, Double-Sided Bookcase Floor (2010), in which she employs all of the strategies from Bildraum- all that she learned from and reinterpreted in the objects she collected- in a pastiche of modernist styles. In Double-Sided Bookcase Floor, a reflective steel support serves as the foundation for an architectural model constructed from trimmed books after Mies' plan for a brick house from 1923-24. The books, all of which are about modern art and architecture, are covered on the bottom by fabric, again in the colors of Reich's Café Samt und Seide, and on top by L-shaped panes of polished steel. The steel base reflects the colors and book edges, creating a dense, layered field of overlapping representations from the diverse modernist sources that Fragateiro has reimagined.

In each of the historical references in Bildraum- from the colorful Gütermann threads to the recreation of Reich's and Mies' models to the design of the Kursbuch and Edition Suhrkamp- the aesthetic impact of each object overrides semantic content. Yet, through her interventions, Fragateiro highlights some of the milestones of modernist material culture and brings this cultural context to the surface. In each of the emblematic material or modernist objects she collects, Fragateiro draws connections between the production of knowledge and its aesthetic ramifications. Whether motivated by a biographical history that draws her into an aesthetic context, or compelled by a design to make a sculptural intervention, for Fragateiro, this accumulated cultural history embeds aesthetic potential as well as semantic and historical content within the object, which

waits only for a cut or a change of perspective to bring it to the surface.

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