

Werner Heldt, Max Paul, *Resting Visions*

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Here's a proposition: The most "Berlin" monument of all is not the TV tower, the Gedächtniskirche or even the Brandenburger Tor—it is the emptiness itself. And nowhere is it more intact or better displayed than at the Kulturforum. As more and more of the city's formerly so plentiful empty spaces are patched up with shopping centres and endless apartment buildings in the Neue Prächtigkeit style, the Kulturforum still presents as a void, and this in spite of the Gemäldegalerie, Matthäus Kirche, Kunstbibliothek, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Philharmonie, Staatsbibliothek and, finally, Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie that all line this formerly wall-adjacent deadzone. Perhaps the forthcoming Museum der Moderne will manage to topple the Nothing, but I doubt it. As it stands, this vast unencumbered plain speaks rather beautifully to the city as the open wound that it is; a resounding question best left unanswered.

A neighbour to the notion of emptiness is that of transparency—the key to Mies' building, as well as to the construction of post-war Germany. If 'edifice' names both an architectural structure and a complex system of belief, the glass box on the Kulturforum with its great ideological attachments is definitely both. And in the same way that Corbusier thought to bring the toilet into the livingroom in the name of full disclosure and absolute un-repression, so the incredible and morose works on display in these galleries parade the physical and psychological disintegration of the 20th Century. It is said that Corbusier's wife would cover the toilet with a tablecloth when they had guests.

When undergoing psychoanalysis, transferring from the chair to the couch is a watershed moment (sometimes literally). The horizontal position triggers a loss of agency and a blurring of subjectivity; there, language belongs not so much to the speaker or the addressee, but puffs upwards from the mouth like smoke from a chimney, releasing toxins from the subconscious to dissipate into the atmosphere. There are many similarities in how modernist thinking was applied in architecture and psychoanalysis, similarities that invite a discourse on psycho-geography, and the urban space as collective mindmap, the face of the city. The emptiness of the Kulturforum, therefore, is related to the transparency of Mies' museum, and how, as the century progressed, the modernist canvas was increasingly vacant, and even vacated. On the surface, we might see on empty canvases and in the modern city grid ideas about stylistic progression in art and the rational organisation of liberal society, but immediately below is a gaping, screaming cavity of doubt.

One origin story of psychogeography, as referenced in a previous work of Max Paul titled "Meander", is that of the Cretian labyrinth. Around 3000 BC, rumours circulated throughout the Mediterranean of a network of walkways beneath the royal palace at Knossos so vast and intricate visitors were known to get lost forever. The famed labyrinth was never found, leading archaeologists to speculate that it was actually not some vicious trap, guarded by a monster, but simply the city itself. Come to think of it, between Sally Bowles and Christiane F, Berlin has often been spoken about on similar terms. The Greek meander known to line buildings, rooms and clothes, in fact, is the graphic representation of the path through the labyrinth. Amid the otherwise clean lines of Classical Greece as it was inherited by the modernists, this sign is at once fractal and emblem of a dangerous and disorienting complexity.

Psychogeography is a two-way street. As individuals can be swallowed by the collective hivemind of the city, so the city can be read as an expression of subjective consciousness. In his series of

lithographs known as *Berlin am Meer* (1947), the artist Werner Heldt (1904-1954) signed his initials on the blank firewalls of the city's typical 19th century tenement buildings: what we see is clearly Berlin, but as in a dream or nightmare that is, specifically, his. What would have been bombed-out streets Heldt pictures as strangely intact—perhaps how he'd always remember them—the destruction instead being figured by the strange presence of a sea of rubble flooding the streets. The sea, that subject of melancholic contemplation, as Heldt also thought about it, a place to lose yourself and get lost. This is another kind of watershed, which you may observe from your place on Mies' daybed, horizontal or not; one kind of answer to how emptiness can be possible among so much brick and glass and steel.

*Kristian Vistrup Madsen, 2022*