

Sven-Olov Wallenstein Interview I with Penny Lewis October 2014

Penny Lewis: My first question is why Mies?

Sven-Olov Wallenstein: Why Mies. Well when I wrote that book I was intrigued by the idea of silence. I'm not an architect, I'm a philosopher and I've been reading a lot of architectural theory and teaching and supervising PhD's and have been engaged in a lot of research. Having read Manfredo Tafuri and Massimo Cacciari, and many others who explored the work on Mies I discovered this idea of silence - withdrawal, negativity, renunciation - it seemed to be like a recurrent idea in a lot of the philosophical orientated scholarship on Mies. So I wanted to explore the implications of what this silence could mean. Of course that is tied together with other things in static theory, with Theodor Adorno for instance, his work on Beckett and with his work on John Cage - the idea of silence as a kind of ending point for modern aesthetics. So the book is really a reading of other readings for me, it's not a book on Mies as such, it's a reading of other readings of Mies, trying to figure out what this tops of silence actually means.

PL: I am familiar with Tafuri's two volumes on Modern Architecture in which the authors talk about the silence in Mies's work. Why did you choose to focus on Mies specifically?

S-OW: I think 'Modern Architecture' is his key text. Tafuri is one of the great historians and he's also one of the most influential architectural historians for a philosophical audience because he has ideas that are more philosophically oriented. A lot of people read Tafuri who are not necessarily architects so in that sense he's very interesting. When I discovered him I had read a lot of Adorno. To me he was like the Adorno of architectural theory. That's why I was interested in him and these lines about silence, or the withdrawal or the renunciation in the Seagram Building are key passages in his book. And it was also picked up by Cacciari who then continued to develop the idea. (Cacciari was also the Mayor of Venice for a while, for about 10 years). He connected it specifically to Heidegger, to Heidegger's understanding of technology, and then I found Reinhold Martin's book 'The Organisation Complex', he also starts from this passage in Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co's book and develops it from a different angle. So I found all these tropes about silence being interpreted in various ways and somehow wanted to bring them together into one systematic reading. This is why the book is called 'The Silences of Mies' because it's obviously a plural silence.

PL: How would you explain what Tafuri was trying to say?

S-OW: Its part of a chapter called 'The Activity of the Modern Masters After the War' where you have a series of endings, Corbusier, Gropius and others, and all have this sense of endings or a certain sense of waning, fading, loss of creativity, how modern architecture somehow peters out at the end, but there is one ending which is the 'tragic' ending which is a great gesture, which is the Miesian ending. I think this is why this passage was then picked up by Cacciari in his interpretation as the key passage in Tafuri's entire work. That's of course Cacciari's reading so maybe I'm now reading Tafuri through Cacciari.

PL: So from Tafuri's point of view it's an expression of failure?

S-OW: Not of failure. Obviously modernism fails but it can fail in different ways, it can fail in a grandiose way which somehow doesn't just embody but incorporates the contradictions of the modernists idea and makes it into great work, like *the* final work. It has the same position as Beckett's plays would have in Adorno's reading and the old conversionist idea of silence. From my point of view not being an architect but being interested in the connection with Heidegger was important because Cacciari was a close collaborator of Tafuri's at the school here in Venice (Università IUAV di Venezia). He brought a more philosophically structured attitude to that kind of historical reading. Cacciari connects him to Heidegger who I was working on at the time so for me there was a point of convergence between many different things.

PL: If we leave Heidegger for now and explore the meaning as opposed to the reading of the silence of Mies that Tafuri is talking about. You said that it's not necessarily about crisis, or that it is about crisis, but crisis can have different qualities. Emptiness and the silence, can they be inter-exchanged as expressions or is there something different about the idea of silence?

S-OW: Obviously in many contexts they can be exchanged - renunciation, withdrawal, emptiness, and this blank reflection etcetera, so there are a whole series of images, but in the literature the trope of silence is the recurrent one. You also find it in Michael Hays for instance and other texts. Tafuri and Dal Co's book which was published in '76 in Italian, formed a kind of paradigm for other interpretations. Everyone kept repeating and reinterpreting and twisting this trope over and over

again. But what we are going to be exploring in the lecture today is perhaps a bit more systematic. I think there are three basic ways to understand this silence, or there are three different silences, and the first one is a little bit in Tafuri and explicitly in Cacciari, where this silence is the ending of a certain metaphysical idea about architecture. It connects the history of philosophy and Cacciari connects it to Heidegger. It has to do with the way modern art becomes impossible in the face of modern technology. It's a kind of metaphysical ontological speculative reading of this trope of silence. Secondly someone like Hays for instance is closer to the Frankfurt School and I think all of these things, all of which are already in Tafuri's texts are close to the Frankfurt School, the silence it's not so much a metaphysical ending but more like a socialist structure continuation, it has to do with art under capitalism. Silencing doesn't have anything to do with the history of philosophy and metaphysics, only in a mediated fashion, but it is fundamentally something to do with the contradictions of art under late capitalism; that the formal languages of architecture are emptied out because there is no commodification, and so it's more or less a socially oriented understanding. And these can be combined, and many interpretations tend to combine these two, but they are still distinct readings. The third one I picked up from Reinhold Martin's book 'The Organisational Complex' it says that silence is in fact not just an act of renunciation but is something that opens up a different interpretation because the screen like quality or surface is actually not just an ending it is the beginning of a new kind of modularity. So it is a modulation that opens up the possibility for other repetitions in the future. For Tafuri this is a tragic moment which is then repeated as a 'farce' because his is the old Marxian history reading. And what Reinhold says is - no - its neither 'tragedy' or 'farce', it's the beginning of a kind of new modularity. So, from one point of view it looks like a silencing and on the other hand is already replete with a plethora of other discourses and possibilities that open up. Reinhold wants to get away from the sense of ending and exhausting - so exhaustion is only one moment. Something is exhausted but something new begins, and I think this is the most interesting interpretation because it's a more productive one, and it shows how formal languages were reinterpreted and became the stock and trade of lots of modern architecture or more specifically modern corporate architecture.

PL: What about Mies himself. In your book you make a lot of references to his writings.

S-OW: Yes there's a lot of talk about Mies and I think he's kind of oracular in a way. If you read this collection of texts 'Das kunstlose Wort: Gedanken zur Baukunst' (The Artless Word: thoughts on the Art of Building) it's clear that he's not a philosopher - I mean he's influenced by Romano Guardini, a Thomist who nobody reads anymore. A great many modern artists read bad philosophy. But he had his own ideas for sure. I am really not a scholar of Mies and am really just picking up the interpretations of others. He might not have accepted this heavy philosophical reading, but he does talk about concepts like 'almost nothing', and he was definitely a minimalist artist.

PL: I'm sure I read somewhere that Mies' silence was due to the fact that he thought he didn't need to talk about architecture.

S-OW: But he did. You know the 'Artless Word' is a big book and he makes a lot of statements from the '20s onward. I think he was a very self-conscious architect. You know Beatriz Colomina wrote that he was always projecting himself and creating a persona for himself. In the '20s he was very conscientious about being part of the right avant-garde groups. He made all these theoretical projects in the '20s, the glass skyscrapers, which he surrounded by text and oracular statements so in a sense it's not unlike Corbusier in that he combines statements, texts and words in a certain way. So if there is a silence in Mies it is a very calculated and self conscious silence.

PL: Still sticking with Mies, I know you're not a scholar of Mies and you're not a social historian either, but I'm very interested in that period in the US (the period when a lot of European scholars have lost interest in him), when he's not part of the European avant-garde, he's doing something else. Architects like Alison and Peter Smithson looked to Mies in the post war period and he offers something. He appears to be striving to give expression to something that's important in the post war period. The Smithsons relate to that; do you have any sort of insights into what that sentiment or impulse is?

S-OW: I'm sorry, I didn't quite get the point you're making?

PL: In the 1950s architects in Britain that identify with Mies like Alison and Peter Smithson are unusual. Most people in Britain would identify with Le Corbusier or they might identify with what happened in Europe or Scandinavia during the 1930s. But the Smithson's identified with Mies because he expresses something about the peculiarities of the post war period - as if, at that moment, you have an option, you can go one way or another. There's something of a particular quality about his attitude, not his philosophy but his attitude.

S-OW: But what did they say, I mean I don't know them enough, I know a lot about them but I didn't know they had a specific connection to Mies, what did they say about Mies?

PL: Well they spend quite a lot of time in their book 'Modernism without Rhetoric' talking about why Mies still represents the aspiration to give form to the modernistic impulse. That's the basic thesis although it's more insistent about the relationship between form, and technology and architectural expression.

S-OW: I don't know so much about that so I'm reluctant to say anything, but I would say that what interests me rather is the way that Mies would connect with someone like John Cage for instance, the glass surfaces would be about emptiness that is also a fullness. What appears as a kind of formalistic reductivism is in fact also part of an opening up of the work, towards the work. You can see it in Rauschenberg's white paintings from '51 and the silent piece by Cage a couple of years later - and the the work of the whole neo-avant-garde movement which has traditionally been perceived as a reductivist or 'emptying out', but which is in fact a new type of exploration of how the work is opened up - how it loses its autonomy and becomes part of a context - how it becomes part of the corporeal situation of the spectator. A lot of historical art scholarship today has asserted that the opening up of the work occurred in the 60s because of minimalist conceptual art are now pushing that transformation back in history. It began much earlier. I mean to use those horrible terms modern, post modern, the post modern began much earlier and what art historians are doing now is erasing this line - because the art historical canon somehow pinpointed the '60s as the moment it broke through - is now being dissolved I would say.

PL: Do you agree with that?

S-OW: Yes I think the truth about history is that we don't know. It's just a question of how we read history, and so I think from our point of view we need to move beyond this fetishising of the '60s and push those things back in history to see there is no clear divide anywhere in history.

PL: One of the problems with that is that you then have an interpretation of modernism that's a little bit one-sided.

S-OW: Yes or you can say that everything which is post-modern was also modern - obviously that's the end result. This division can be kind of a heuristic device because it allows you to see the differences as long as you don't believe too strongly in there being any particular moment in time where this division occurs but as a kind of heuristic tool, as a tool for investigation it can be used. As long as you don't put too much belief in the tool itself it can allow you to make discoveries but what was actually the true about the historical moment is only a question of our interpretation. That's of course something we view from our vantage point in time, how we read history.

PL: Is there good history and bad history?

S-OW: Yes of course there are bad histories and good histories. If you look at art history 'what is the true meaning of Picasso or Duchamp' as Hal Foster would say, and I agree with that. It's a kind of retroactive question - we rediscover moments because we find a reticence in the present. The same thing happens in the history of philosophy, we rediscover old thinkers; suddenly they become actualised because something happens in the present. So history is not a given in that sense. I think the problems with the kind of interpretations we find in Tafuri, Cacciari and also Hays is that history is there - that we need to discover what actually happened. But I think someone like Reinhold Martin would say that whatever happened is not really so interesting. The interesting thing is what happens if we look at history in a certain way? Which is obviously not to deny historical scholarship but the facts are there to be interpreted and they mean something. Works means something from our point of view. If you listen to Beethoven from the point of view of Schönberg he would sound different obviously. And as Adorno would say, and I think Adorno is right, that one needs to listen to Beethoven from the point of view of Schönberg or Goethe from the point of view of Beckett - and we have no other option other than to look at it that way. I mean this is the way Goethe and Beethoven looked at history so in that sense we're doing the same thing.

PL: The danger of course for a younger generation of people is that they can then become indifferent because everything is a product of who you chose to look through the eyes of.

S-OW: Perhaps it's true, but I would say there is also the inverted danger, I remember Mark Cousins once said 'how can you teach people at the AA to become interested in baroque architecture?' you can't do it by giving them historical facts because they couldn't care less, and you could say 'you need to learn this because you want to become erudite persons', and they still couldn't care less. It doesn't work. The same thing with the history of philosophy, I teach history of philosophy, and you can't teach 16th century philosophy saying you need to know this because it actually happened.

PL: Why not?

S-OW: Because it's an un-philosophical way of reading history because the texts are there, they're dead and they're closed and you memorise them and then you do an exam, or you repeat what's being said. Why would you do that?

PL: But as you say by restudying it throws light on your own situation.

S-OW: On your own situation - and you need to approach it from some point of view in time which is inevitably your own point, so you need to read classical texts from the present.

PL: One of the things that I think is quite interesting about architecture, and please don't be offended, is that because students don't have a broad liberal systematic chronological education then their relationship to philosophy can be very faddish. You write a book and then they say 'oh I need to know a little bit about Piranesi so I'll read a little bit about it' and so we have this strange sampling of philosophy and history. I would say the counter position to that is that if everybody had a little bit of an insight into everything we would be less faddish?

S-OW: Sure, I mean obviously that's a problem in philosophy. I've been teaching it for many years in various art schools and architecture schools and I know the fad problem. If an artist, an architect or a filmmaker reads, say Deleuze, and they produce a work or a design out of it then of course that's a moment of ridicule! Then again, you can't say as a philosopher 'I have the authority of this text and they mean this and that', you can't do that because every interpretation of a text - which also transgresses the disciplinary boundaries - an artist reads a philosopher, necessarily entails a transformation. Otherwise there wouldn't be any potential. So if an artist, a painter reads Merleau-Ponty and does something with it its fine! So I can't say you are not allowed to do that, that's obviously completely unproductive. What I do as a philosopher when I used to teach in those schools, I'd say 'fine you can do whatever you want but if you know more about the concept you will actually be able to get more out of them - you will be able to use them in a better way if you understand their history, their ideology what they mean etcetera. You still have to do your own interpretation because you are not philosophers but you could a better interpretation if you know the history of them'. So in that sense I don't think there's a contradiction between having a lot of historical knowledge and then producing a new interpretation of them - and also an interpretation which displaces the work into a completely different disciplinary context - which is the context of art production or architectural production. So that's what I feel is my task as a teacher. I couldn't teach them art or architecture because they are artists and architects but I can teach them a certain way of approaching philosophical texts that would allow students to get more out of the text - without attempting to make them into scholarly philosophers because I mean that has no point - they can't do that.

PL: The thing that I found quite interesting in 'The Silences of Mies' is that right at the beginning its almost polemical. Its sort of saying, people use Foucault in a certain way and there's a problem with that because that's a bit one sided, it suggest Foucault was not interested in agency. Mies is particularly interesting because he is quite unfashionable at the moment; not among certain people, but you wouldn't find tutors in studio referring to Mies much anymore. There's a general tendency to deride architects with a very strong sense of agency, individual agency, which I think Mies epitomises.

S-OW: Absolutely. Yes Tafuri and Cacciari also write about him as one of the last great artists - and his pronunciation is *his* stance - and even though he couldn't sign off the buildings himself because he wasn't part of the American Architectural Guild - so in a certain way his signature was blurred and Philip Johnson had to sign them off. . But this also why he is such a strong presence in certain strands of critical theory that want to retain the notion of authorship. Mies is in that sense also one of the last great authors, also Le Corbusier for instance. Whereas modern architects tend to be in groups and assemblages of people and they allow the idea of bureaucracy. I have a Swedish PhD student that I accepted to supervise just yesterday who wants to write about 'bureaucracy as agency', what kind of bureaucratic structure is actually behind the agency - how bureaucratic structures are actually the agency behind architecture. It's very close to Reinhold Martin's study about the organisational complex. So he's working on various official buildings in Sweden, how they were constructed during the 60s and 70s and really wants to get rid of the whole idea of authorship or at least make a more complex idea of authorship. The fetishising of the author is of course then part of the late modernist paradigm - where you also find people like Adorno and Tafuri. That's why I say Tafuri is like the Adorno of architectural history, he knows that the author is doomed, but he can disappear in various ways. He can just fade away or die in a grand gesture. There's this great quote from Adorno when he speaks about Schönberg. He says that Schönberg puts a halt to dialectics, but dialectically! I think it's in his 'Philosophy of New Music' which was published for the first time in '46, '47. There's an English translation, just after the war. In it Stravinsky is the bad ending, Stravinsky is the eclectic, almost the proto-post-modern composer who Adorno hates at that time. But he likes

Schönberg because he ends it dialectically. That I think is very close to the reading of Mies you find in Tafuri's book.

PL: It sounds like you're saying that we accept the fact that the author is doomed, that that's the condition? I didn't get that sense from reading what you were saying about the one sided reading of Foucault.

S-OW: This one sided reading of Foucault has already been accepted for the last 20 years.

PL: What's been accepted - the end of the author?

S-OW: No the reading that the core of his work was mainly oriented towards discipline and repression, is wrong.

PL: Determinism?

S-OW: Yes. It's just completely wrong and in his publications, the many lectures from the '70s, the huge body of work which has been published, you see that this idea of discipline - the 'Panopticon' from 1975 - is just one small idea that he was flirting with for a year or so. It's just part of a long long development. His real issues are about agency and how to become a subject, and how to exert a certain freedom in relation to oneself which he calls 'subjectification'. Discipline was only a little part.

PL: Like Sartre?

S-OW: Not like Sartre. He thought Jean-Paul Sartre was too Cartesian. For Sartre freedom was always absolute and for Foucault freedom is always situated - located in a particular moment in time, and its conditions would constantly change. And so the task of philosophy is to uncover those conditions that both prohibit freedom and make freedom possible at each moment in history. I think a much more fluid Foucault has entered the discourse, but not so much the architectural discourse because the example of the prison was so visible. It was easy to use because it had a form and a visual quality. So it's over-cited. I was doing research on a French group called the CERFI 'Centre for the Research of Institutional Formation' and it was actually the moment when Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari came into contact with Architecture (It was an avant-garde group. There's an anthology coming out called 'Deleuze and the City'). The group was led by Félix Guattari who was a psychoanalyst and a political activist. And in the group they got a commission to work on public facilities or public institutions - 'equipment collective'. They wanted to analyse why people desire, or why there's a demand for public facilities, it was kind of post '68. And at the time they had something very interesting called 'contract research' which was a completely crazy idea, or a very smart idea because the French government thought - 'okay we have all these revolutionary groups - we need to pacify them. Let's give them money so they can do research'. So anyway, they could apply for money to do research, you didn't need to have a PhD in anything. You didn't have to have any formal qualifications. You could be an activist or a crazy guy!

PL: Did the Department of Education do this or..?

S-OW: The Minister of Interior Affairs or something like that. So they gave them money, and we interviewed some of these people in CERFI and they said it was like having a drug dealer, 'we got free drugs for a couple of years and then they said no more money!'. Everything just collapsed. They did this research on public facilities - it was '70, '71 and Deleuze was involved Foucault gave talks and I think that's how their interest into 'space' began. It's one of the crucial moments in why 'space' becomes important. They worked in architecture on hospitals and prisons, the city as an idea, and I think a lot of that work then coalesced into 'Discipline and Punish' but it's a highly politicised and almost 'extreme left' radical splinter group. And you can see how political their understanding of space, the city, habitat, the building, the institution was. A little bit of that came into the prison analysis. But it also went through many other channels and he published several books which are still only in French - collective research projects on the politics of habitation and so on. They were analysing the fact that the French state in Paris began to analyse how people live, how many children they had in the early 19th century, social medicine. They were investigating the origin of that concept - also statistics were used, the hospital was one of the first key studies. How the hospital becomes a machine for analysing the city - and there was a popular book that came out in '77 that they all read called 'The Curing Machines', which is possibly also one of the sources for Corbusier's living machine because the phrase was taken from Doctor Jacques-René Tenon who came up with the idea in the 1780s when he said the hospital should not be a particular building that has a certain structure that symbolises authority and the history of medicine, but rather that it should be a curing machine dispersed throughout the city so curing could occur all over the place. So it's a kind of dissolution of the concrete building so it becomes more like a diagram that extends throughout the city. From that point onward Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari's interest in space began in a very concrete empirical

way. I think this has been completely lost in the reception of Foucault because these books are not being translated, they are not being re-edited, I don't think any of these texts are translated into English but you find them in weird archives in Paris where there is some research. So this is also one of the things that I wanted to bring up in the book to get a more nuanced image of what Foucault was doing - bio politics and the caring of life also originates in that interest in the hospital as a curing machine.

PL: This doesn't seem like 'fad' research to me. Of course it's from a position but it is real research.

S-OW: Sure. Many of these ideas have been known for a long time in philosophical scholarship but haven't been looked at in architecture at all. So when they asked me to write something on Foucault I wrote this book. It's a brief text. Obviously it could have been a huge book but it was part of a series of small books looking at these issues.