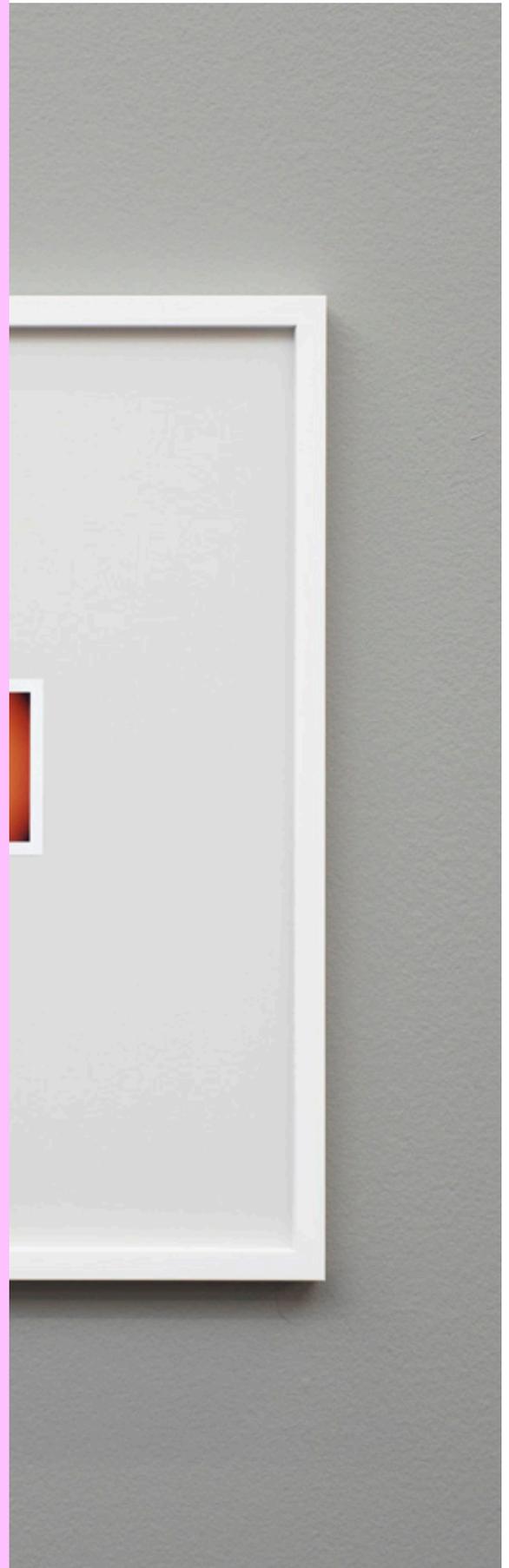


**Espen  
Gleditsch  
Poly-  
morphous  
Magical  
Sub-  
stance**



# Espen Gleditsch: Photography, architecture and the art of misrepresentation

Elias Redstone  
April 2017

Interrogating the unintentional shift in meaning that takes place when artwork is reproduced is a central, recurring theme in Espen Gleditsch's practice. The basis for his 2016 work *The Large Glass, A Close Reading* is the tale of how Marcel Duchamp's glass painting *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, even) was recreated for an exhibition at Moderna Museet, Stockholm. The new version was constructed by studying black-and-white photographs of the original artwork published in books and a hand-coloured photograph by Duchamp, and the resulting design deviated significantly from the original. Nevertheless Duchamp happily authenticated and signed the work in 1961 and it entered the collection of Moderna Museet. A more technically accurate reproduction, made after Duchamp's death, however, and unauthorised by the artist, also sits in Moderna Museet's collection challenging the authority of the work Duchamp himself had signed.

Gleditsch revels in these disparities and quirks of history to raise questions about truth, authenticity and perception. A few months after this work was shown at Kunstnerens Hus in Oslo, Gleditsch presented the exhibition 'Polymorphous Magical Substance' at Oslo's Kunstnerforbundet. This project, reproduced now at Bergen Kunsthall, explores how photography again distorts and misrepresents its topic, the subject being architecture this time. The irony of this representation of an exhibition originally shown elsewhere is surely not lost on the artist and he has taken the opportunity here to expand on the original, adding new work and creating an updated, refined simulacrum.

Photography and architecture have a long, interconnected history and the relationship between them is rife with misrepresentation and mistruths. While architecture was initially the perfect muse for early photographers – its static nature proving to be the perfect subject matter for the long exposures required by the first cameras – the association between the two mediums has become more complex since, oscillating to perform different needs at different times.

Architects have long understood the power of photography to communicate their vision of the world, and would often gravitate to photographers that could provide the relevant publicity materials they needed. Once Le Corbusier became

aware of the photographer Lucien Hervé they formed a close working relationship that informed how Le Corbusier's concrete structures were seen by the world. Likewise several mid-century Californian architects would only entrust Julius Shulman with the creation of the photographic image – that is, the public image – of their built work. These commissioned images are intended as advertising, to build the brand of the architect, and often promote an aspirational lifestyle. "I sell architecture better and more directly and more vividly than the architect does," Shulman once said.

Indeed, it is in modernism that photography and architecture become indistinguishable forces. Photography did not just lend itself to capturing the formal language of modern architecture and disseminating it to an international audience, in turn popularising the ideologies the architecture sought to represent; it influenced and informed how modern architecture itself was designed. Historians have argued that the use of black-and-white photography during the rise of modernism perpetuated the movement's monochromatic aesthetic. Colourful façades and interiors became viewed as shades of black, white and grey in the architectural press and consumer magazines.

At the same time, photographers found that the subject of architecture offered an intriguing protagonist with which to explore wider social conditions. Walker Evans, the forefather of documentary-style photography, was an early adopter of the idea that the photography of the built environment can reveal truths about who we are and how we live, and our ambitions, achievements and failings as a society. His subject matter – ranging from chapels in the deep south to factories and retailers – offered insights into American life that resonate today. There was an inherent social agenda to his work, picked up by other photographers who used the built environment as a metaphor for social and cultural change. Bernd and Hilla Becher, for example, started to document sites of industry in Germany and across Europe to catalogue typologies that were disappearing from the landscape, and bring attention to the implications of this. While the Becher's subject matter overtly displays its function – blast furnaces, gas holders, water towers – the American photographer Lewis Baltz was documenting the non-descript exteriors of the new industrial units he saw emerging on the edge of cities. His

series *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974) is critical of faceless modern architecture that resulted in a built environment that is all about the surface, revealing so little about what happens on the inside.

The photography of architecture, whatever its intention, has to constantly contend with the fundamental challenge of transforming spatial, three-dimensional, phenomenological experiences into a flat image. Photography distorts, edits and misconstrues the physical world. And if we are to believe that the photography of architecture can reveal wider truths about society, what are the implications for truth and meaning when it is to some degree misrepresented?

"A lot of what I have been doing in my photographic practice is exploring the inability of the camera to properly relate to the past," says Gleditsch. His exhibition 'Polymorphous Magical Substance' offers a meditation on the problematic of photographic representation versus place. On view are a series of Polaroids taken in iconic homes designed by modernist architects including Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Eileen Gray. The closely cropped, abstract images reveal little of the design of the buildings, providing instead an emotional response to the interior spaces that is more abstract than descriptive.

In his previous projects Gleditsch has exhibited silver-gelatin and archival ink-jet photographs; printing techniques more usually associated with fine art. The display of Polaroids marks a significant shift in his practice. "It was a more intuitive work process for me; more an emotional response than a cognitive process," says Gleditsch. We are offered moments – walls, corners, crevices, openings – that immerse the viewer in the space and appeal to an emotional and aesthetic sensibility; the informal nature of the Polaroids suggesting an intimate journey by the artist through what are, after all, domestic, private spaces.

"I felt emotionally connected to the architecture. The spaces made an impact on me just being in them. I wanted an immersive approach to photography for this project, not to keep a distance," says Gleditsch. Subtle shifts in perspective in some of the images track the artist's movement in space and make his bodily presence tangible: as well as capturing the architectural interiors, the images are a representation of the artist's own actions. The sense of the body moving through space is palpable and the collective images become a portrait of the artist as much as the architecture.

"Polaroids are an essential form of photography. It is light hitting a sheet of paper. No other action," says Gleditsch. "I really enjoy the way you are not in control." While the digital age has offered the photographer unprecedented influence over the creation of photographic image, the humble Polaroid takes control away from the photographer to deliver its standardised and universally recognised aesthetic in terms of size, gloss and colour definition. The fact that it is a dated technology is not lost on Gleditsch. The film he used was discontinued a year before he started the project and so the medium was already grounded in the past – making the images in the exhibition somewhat 'out of time' with contemporary visual culture.

A chromatic modification from reality takes place that bestows Polaroid photographs with their unique spectrum of colour that, nowadays, is often applied to digital photography with a filter to give the impression of nostalgia. In these works, Gleditsch presents a new colour scheme for modern architecture, a modification of the reality created by an automated alchemic process. The colourful view of modernism presented here is no more real than the black-and-white photography that brought it to attention in the first place. The problematic of colour is enhanced by the gallery walls being painted vivid hues of Burnt Sienna, Dark Grey, Pale Pink and Gentian Blue, all colours reproduced from a landmark exhibition of modern architecture that took place in Stuttgart in 1927. These colours were analysed visually by colour conservationists and archived on small strips of paper in watercolour. Gleditsch then photographed these strips – converting the watercolours into Adobe RGB format (which allows for 68 billion colours) – and then converted this into paint by matching the digital file with the closest shade from the NCS colour system (Natural Color System), which has only 1950 colours. How accurate is this process? Are we really looking at modernism's true colours? Again, the artist leaves the question of representation and authenticity hanging in the air.

The buildings Gleditsch has chosen as his subjects are also loaded with meaning, both for their place in architectural history and their more personal stories. Gleditsch had begun to explore the latter in a previous work: *A Place by the Sea*, exhibited in 2016 at Noplace, Oslo. This project focused on Eileen Gray's E-1027 house and, more specifically, Le Corbusier's antagonistic response to it. It features 13 black-and-white archival ink-jet prints of the modernist villa in the south of France and a text-based work exploring the building's tumultuous history, notably how Le Corbusier painted several murals on the immaculately white walls when he had stayed as a guest at the house a few years after Gray had left it in the hands of her by then ex-lover Jean Badovici. Gleditsch quotes the architecture critic Rowan Moore who described the graffiti as 'an act of naked phallocracy', and claimed that Le Corbusier "seemingly affronted that a woman could create such a fine work of modernism, asserted his dominion, like a urinating dog, over the territory."

Le Corbusier's actions could be interpreted as a hostile takeover and with this in mind, Gleditsch's Polaroids take on an almost sinister tone: the artist stalking through contested spaces like an intruder. The sense of his body in these houses is unshakeable, especially with the knowledge that the prints on display were made the moment he pressed the shutter, not at some later date. The works on display were created while Gleditsch stalked these rooms and when he moved on it is as if he took pieces of the architecture with him: fragments that now do the artist's bidding and continue to alter our perception of architectural space.

- Espen Gleditsch was interviewed on 8 February 2017