

# Hume's Evidence

## Alan Johnston wall drawing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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A synergy of idea and form provides the conceptual underpinning for Alan Johnston's wall drawing in the Mies van der Rohe designed Caroline Law building at the MFAH. Johnston's wall drawings are rigorously site-specific, avoiding aesthetic rhetoric by relating and furthering the spatial and cultural specificities of architectural form. Even in their totality these drawings can be easily missed; their shadow-like presence, composed through a progressive accumulation of faint rhythmical lines, engenders an ambivalence in gesture and unannounced presence that defies the casual gaze. The wall drawings appear like a glyph or writing where intelligibility is usurped by a proliferation of marks. The drawings thereby record not only a human presence but also a passage of time that amasses into geometric volumes that typically encircle a void. The drawings often take the shape of a frame upon the wall. This framing of a material "nothing" may be considered a proposition that is an antecedent to cultural reflexivity.

The wall drawing, *Hume's Evidence*, relates not only to the spatial thought of Mies, but also to the allied conceptions of "the museum" and the paradigms of "looking" that emerged through Modernism. In relation to these factors, the particular location of Johnston's installation is crucial. Situated on the outer periphery, and close to the juncture of the two Mies' extensions (the 1958 Cullinan Hall, and the posthumously realized 1974 Brown Pavilion), the wall drawing occupies an interstitial location in the museum complex. Moreover, the space is significantly affected by the recently constructed tunnel that joins the Caroline Law building and the Rafael Moneo designed Beck Building (2000). In relation to this dynamic meeting of architectural programs, the wall drawing inhabits a space that is akin to an anteroom.

Given the inexorable relationship between the wall drawing and its architectural context, it is necessary to consider the circumstances that led to the Mies designed MFAH extensions. Mies' involvement with the Museum began under the aegis of Nina Cullinan, who gifted a substantial sum of money for the building of an extension onto the existing MFAH building. Mies decided to extend the building outward from the courtyard that existed between the original Beaux Arts style building, designed by William Ward Watkin (1924), and the subsequent additions by Watkin and Kenneth Franzheim (1926 and 1953,

respectively). The result was the creation of a large main exhibiting hall un-encumbered by supporting pillars. The Museum was now entered through an elevated north facing, curved glass-facade, which was approached by a short flight of stairs. The second Mies addition in 1974 continued the exoskeleton of the fanning roof plate girders of the 1958 addition, and, directly abutting the clear span universal space of the main exhibiting hall, added a ground level entrance foyer and a mezzanine exhibiting level. This two stage Mies development can be considered as a totality that relates to a later body of work, where his designs were centred upon large single volume spaces (including the Museum for a Small City project of 1943; The Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1956; and Neue National Galerie, Berlin, 1968).

Significant associations exist between the work of both Mies and Johnston; they surface in the relationships between the individual and the space, structure and purpose of the Museum building. The second Mies extension functionally altered the dynamics of passage through the interior and had considerable impact upon the existing relationship between the individual and their surrounding space. Where previously one entered directly into the exhibiting hall, in the second extension one was required to choose a direction through the voluminous interior, moving between levels by a series of open-sided stairways. This use of open space may be equated to freedom in the modern museum, exemplified here in the scale of the main exhibition hall and the multiple approaches into, from and across this space. In the resultant instances of self-orientation and decision-making, this democratization of space tangibly shifts an onus of responsibility upon the spectator. The primacy of the individual in turn leads to participation in the unfolding and shifting views. Ultimately, this may culminate in a heightened awareness of oneself within the space. As an individual moving through the Museum one may potentially become aware of one's own position as spectator, through a reflected and reflexive participation in space.

This reliance upon, and realization of, being an embodied perspective moving through space is also an immanent basis for Alan Johnston's wall drawing. One's encounter of the work unfolds through accumulating levels of engagement. From a distanced perspective, the wall drawing's subdued presence may initially be registered as a building anomaly or trace of past structure. When one moves closer, the pale gray mass is revealed as a fine web of lines hand-drawn directly on the wall. Through a shift in viewing positions and heightened attention, the exposed detail directly implicates the act of looking: looking is turned-in upon itself. As Johnston notes, "I think that the work can bring, without force, to

those viewers with a detached curiosity, a neutral though stoically involved, sense of themselves. This happens through their encounter with the work's resolute passivity, and the ensuing ambivalence about where the space actually occurs, that is, in the spatial sense part of the body. Perhaps this is 'the common sense.'"[1]

This closing reference to "The Common Sense" highlights Johnston's sustained engagement with philosophy and in particular that of the Scottish Enlightenment, a tradition referred to in the titling of this project, *Hume's Evidence*. "The Common Sense", which originates in the philosophy of Thomas Reid, is a pivotal notion for Johnston. Reid elaborates upon the nature of this "faculty": "Aristotle observed that the faculty by which we distinguish the object of the different senses, e.g. white from sweet, must be a faculty distinct from both space and taste. Some of his followers gave the name of the Common Sense to this faculty, some of them made it to be the Intellectual Faculty, they thought vision imperfect without this Faculty." [2] Fundamental to the philosophy of Reid is the necessary relation between the senses to create what we commonly understand as perception. Reid's position developed in part as a response to what was perceived as the inherent scepticism of David Hume, yet both philosophic systems seek to ground knowledge in experience. For Hume all ideas must have a corresponding "impression": the unmediated or non-filtered components of mental life. Through a personal mental archaeology Hume seeks to retain only those ideas which have such an appropriate basis. Relating this back to Johnston, we uncover within the wall drawing the analogous layering of impression and idea as we engage with the work. Through its ambiguous presence, and inherent demands on the audience, the possibility arises of an awareness of the dynamic mental movement from impression to idea.

Modernist buildings may also be thought to share an equivalent passage between sensation and ideology. Glass is a functional element in the realization of Modernism's utopian aspirations; barriers are visually removed bringing the outside in and the inside out. Its material and functional ability to perceptually dissolve peripheral structures led Mies to claim that his structures were "'neither core nor shell; it is all one.' The exterior and interior of my buildings are one you cannot divorce them. The outside takes care of the inside." [3] The large expanses of glass in the Museum building create a complex dialogue between interior and exterior space that expands beyond the aspirations of Modernism. For glass exists as both visual conduit and structural barrier. While adhering to the Modernist intention to remove barriers it none the less fails to completely dematerialize itself. In its transparency, glass never becomes identical with absence.

In his writing on Mies' architecture, Joseph Masheck notes that Mies described his buildings as "'*beinahe nichts*,' 'almost nothing'" and Masheck in turn suggests that "the *beinahe* is at least as important as the *nichts*." [4] This insubstantial, yet resolute, presence of form specifically relates to Johnston's wall drawings. In an essay by Charles Esche, he comments that "Johnston's work is, at times, almost invisible but then 'almost' is not invisible at all." [5] Thus, the reductive work of both Mies and Johnston has a distinctive presence in relation to absence. *Hume's Evidence*, is fundamentally rooted in the human and the tactile; and perceptively realized through the unfolding of a reflexive triangulation of the perceiver, the artist and the architectural setting. The relationship between these elements expounds a complexity of self as it evolves and develops in synthesis of place, space and culture.

#### References

- 1 Alan Johnston quoted in M. Gooding, "The Radiant Mirror" in *Haus Wittgenstein Alan Johnston Inverleith House*, The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 1999, without pagination
- 2 Cited by Alan Johnston in "A Without State" in *Haus Wittgenstein Alan Johnston Inverleith House*, The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 1999, without pagination
- 3 Quoted in *Mies in America*, P. Lambert (ed.), Harry N Abrams, NY, 2001, p. 403
- 4 Joseph Masheck, "Tired Tropes" in *Building Art: Modern Architecture under Cultural Construction*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 203
- 5 Charles Esche, *Asymmetric Cube Alan Johnston with Shinichi Ogawa*, Osaka Foundation of Culture, 2000, without pagination