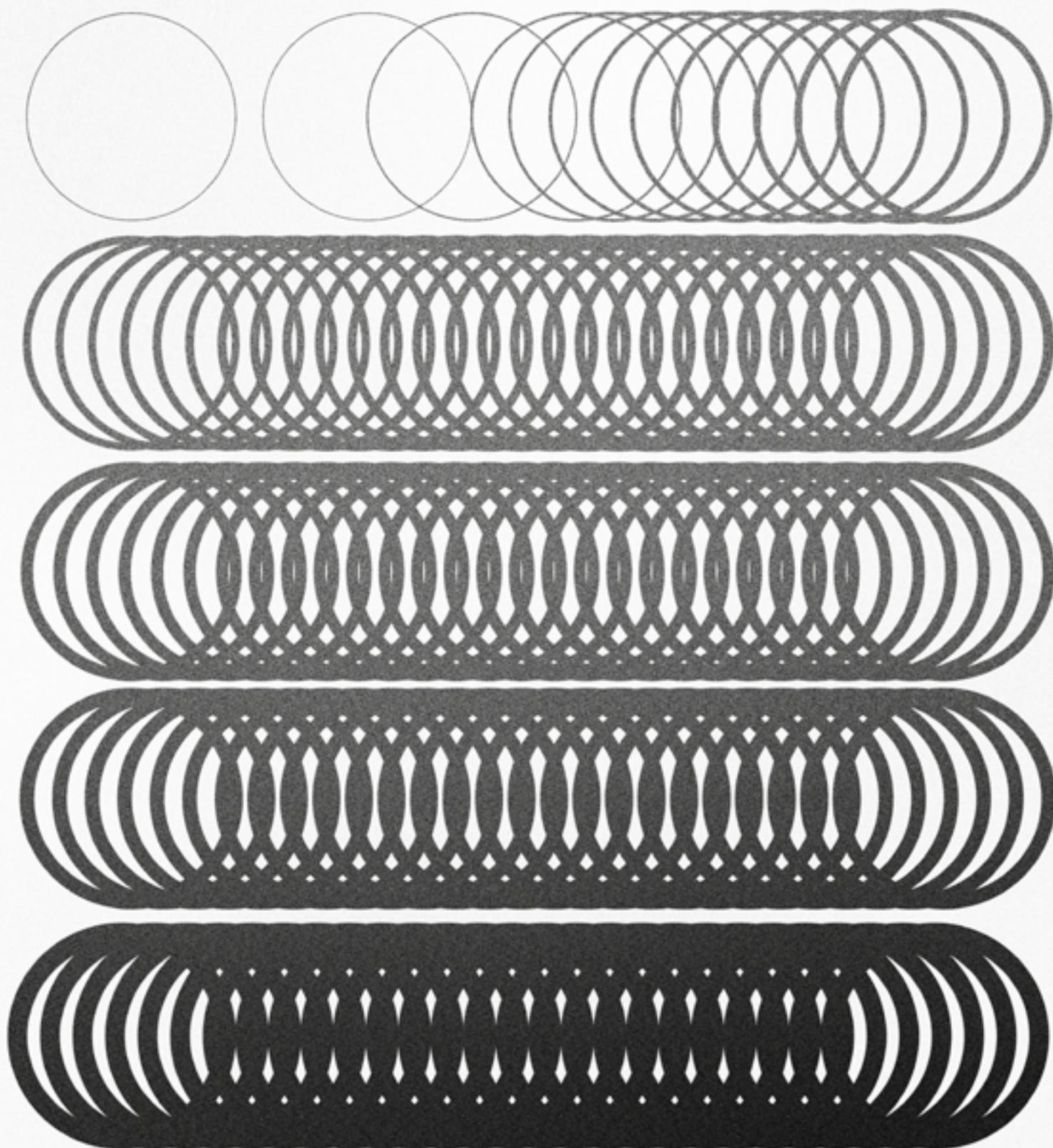


IT BEGINS WITH ONE WORD  
CHOOSE YOUR OWN

KATARZYNA  
KRAKOWIAK



22.07 → 23.08.2020 | Pavelló Mies van der Rohe  
Opening 22.07.2020 | 20:00 H  
Curated by Marcin Szczelina & Ivan Blasi

FUNDACIÓ  
MIES VAN DER ROHE  
BARCELONA

IWA  
INSTITUT  
ARTYSTYCZNY  
WARSZAWA

INSTITUT POLSKI  
W KRAKOWIE

**INTERVIEW BETWEEN ARTIST KATARZYNA KRAKOWIAK  
AND CURATORS MARCIN SZCZELINA AND IVAN BLASI**

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The final steps of the preparation of the intervention in the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona took place during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From Oliva, Warsaw and Barcelona, several online meetings between the artist and the curators took place and shaped the project. Many interesting topics and questions were brought up and this interview summarises these discussions.

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**MARCIN SZCZELINA:** When we received the invitation from the Mies van der Rohe Foundation, our first thought was to make a sound installation based on your previous experience and works. We wanted to find a new language, a new narrative about design and architecture through sound. I like the idea of talking about it not as a sound installation but a sound sculpture.

**KATARZYNA KRAKOWIAK:** I've never thought about it as an installation. Maybe because the physicality of sound is very important for me. Working with sculpture always means working with the space between objects. It's never just a sculpture.

**MS:** What was your first feeling when you entered the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion knowing that such an iconic piece of architecture will become the setting of your work?

**KK:** When I saw the architectural plans of the building, I was shocked that Mies van der Rohe had chosen this particular location. Now, when I've been working there for such a long time, I completely understand his decision. I didn't have any expectations. My only problem was that for me this building looks better without people, whereas I consider architecture as something that embraces relations and conversations between people – not only the building itself. This was a challenge for me. But when I enter the Pavilion, I feel like a beautiful person and I can also see that in other people – that this space makes them feel beautiful.

**MS:** I'm asking about that because when I visit a venue that I've read or heard about so many times, I usually feel disappointed – as if reality didn't live up to my expectations. We usually see architectural icons as postcards – photos taken from the best angles, hiding what's behind. Especially nowadays, in the era of Instagram and social media in general. You very often need to show a building through just one picture. Ivan, you travel a lot considering buildings for the Mies van der Rohe Award. Is your experience similar?

**IVAN BLASI:** Even if you check the place on Google Street View, it has nothing to do with what you see when you arrive there. Many people seem surprised by a given space in terms of its scale. "I imagined it bigger" or "I imagined it smaller" – that's something you hear a lot. As for the Barcelona Pavilion, the sentence you very often hear is: "I imagined it bigger". From the architectural point of view, the Pavilion itself tricks us a lot in terms of its size and scale. In fact, it's more than 1 000 m<sup>2</sup> large, so it's pretty impressive. But

it appears well-fitted to human scale. It also has to do with proportions and certain moments when people are inside: there are some spaces where people feel comfortable and some where they feel rather lost. This kind of experience often shocks us because it's hard to convey them only through images. Of course, there are certain cities, like New York, where you feel you've already been there even if it's your first visit. You've seen it so many times in the movies. But I think it's because you've seen life in it – you've seen gangsters, you've seen love stories, you've seen crazy things happening, so you kind of know this human point of view. If we take the postcard metaphor, on one side there's a photo, but on the other side there's space for words with which somebody tells you about their experience from that place.

**MS:** There's this idea of collecting architecture, which also brings up question of preservation of architecture heritage. Not everyone can travel and COVID-19 has made it even more difficult. Is there any possibility to bring architecture to people around the world?

**IB:** COVID-19 has brought new needs in this respect. I like the idea of collecting experiences. It's not that important to have the building itself, it can be both physical and digital. That's something you have in exhibitions or the Biennale.

**MS:** But haven't we been overwhelmed by digital experiences lately? Social media, live streams, curators walking you through exhibitions online, discussions. That's all nice but I feel a bit tired of it.

**KK:** It's very important that we try to stay alive. We need culture, we need art – we need to show that we're trying to survive, even though it's very difficult right now.. And in order to survive, you need to find a new way to communicate. At the beginning of the lockdown, I was somewhat upset that it was accepted so easily: as if we just needed the Internet and a camera to take everything in online. But now I think that it's a time of redefining these tools. I expect that the situation of isolation will motivate us to use online tools in better or different ways. But I agree that it takes us away from physicality – it's very powerful when you can touch something and physically experience the space. I ask myself if there's some other way to experience it.

**IB:** There are limits to visiting as well. When you go to the Colosseum or the Pantheon, you don't really experience the space as you wanted to. Many of us – and I consider myself part of this group – just check off places on the “to visit” list. I think we need to highlight the enjoyment and awareness of the importance of being in the Pantheon instead of just taking selfie there. If you're just interested in that selfie, your experience of the visit is not that far-removed from a digital experience. There are also places that you can't experience on your own as they are always overcrowded. For example, my experience of the Mona Lisa was better online than at the Louvre because I was not able to see it through the crowd. So it also has to do with the scale of the situation.

**KK:** I've never visited the Vatican because whenever I tried, there were so many people that I resigned. When you visit the Louvre, you can only spend around three seconds in front of the Mona Lisa, so it's also a question of available time. My experience is also always connected with other people – it's important to see how they react, what kind of feelings I can see on their faces. For me this is an integral part of an artwork, concert or performance. It's something I miss now and I'm trying to imagine how it will look like in the future.

**IB:** This is what's interesting about the piece you are preparing for the Pavilion. It can work when nobody is there, with just one person inside, or else with a huge crowd. Working

with the Pavilion this way, where the experience can be so different depending on the situation, you've foreseen how people can react – not only to the piece, but also to the building.

**KK:** I've analysed situations when people listen, for example when they are at museums and galleries. People treat spaces very differently when they try to listen. A very interesting thing about the Pavilion is that people move in a similar way as in a sound installation – they try to hear more and they walk very slowly. Maybe they try to understand and read the building like a book.

**MS:** Now that you've mentioned reading, it reminds me of letters between Mies van der Rohe and the Foundation. I like the idea of calling your piece a letter made of letters sent by people from around the world. At first we've been talking about it in terms of words and finding a new language of communication, but if we think about it in the context of a letter, we'll find a lot of connections between your work, the Pavilion itself and the communication between Mies and the Foundation about rebuilding the Pavilion.

**KK:** We're going back to the letter format, but in a certain way we're also asking Mies for permission to rebuild the Pavilion and we're going through the technical details of it. And we are sending out the letter of invitation to people to join the project and send us words they consider important. In the context of the current global lockdown, we want to offer people hope, send them a message that we can build a new composition together. And I think it's important that it remains site-specific, that we're in conversation with the Pavilion. After one hundred years, we're asking about Modernism, architectural icon and all of these important words. But it's mainly a question about our future. So many things come together here and this project gives me a lot of energy. At the beginning of the pandemic I wanted to postpone it, but then the moment came when I said to myself "no" – the situation has changed but we cannot postpone life.

**IB:** The project does not need to come to an end when people answer our letter. We can answer them back.

**KK:** Yes. It's a question of collaboration and how to get together in these new circumstances. There's some kind of energy and we will see what this energy gives us. I imagine that we will try to play these words to the building and we will see how it responds, how life begins again inside it. I want to work in a very natural, very organic way, without any simulations or mock-ups. We're already collecting the words very organically: people send them in different languages, different quality or volume of sound. We'll see how it all comes together.

**IB:** Many people visiting the Pavilion notice the reflections and effects that different materials create. They ask if this is something Mies designed or is it just something that happened by chance. Of course, we cannot answer for Mies, but in general there are always things you can predict as an artist or a designer, but you'll never be in control of absolutely everything. In rationalism and the modern movement there was this idea that everything can be controlled, but now we know that it's very difficult to foresee what will happen. We need a different approach. For example, when I now design a house, the design changes when I give more leeway to a client or a user.

**KK:** We need other people to make art in public space – we need their reactions. As I've said, it's very important for me to see the people who view the piece, how their bodies react. For now, it's impossible to imagine it online. I'd like to turn my piece into a concert

that the whole of Barcelona will hear. I'm wondering how the work can be extended to reach other people, but it's really hard to imagine how social life will look like in a few months.

**MS:** I really like having my own private space, but what I miss the most during the pandemic is the touch: hugging to say hello, etc. I wasn't even noticing these small gestures before. But at the same time I feel like there's more empathy among people – we're taking responsibility for each other.

**KK:** That's what we want to ask about in this project: what does it mean for us to be together at such a difficult moment, how to take responsibility. I think the lockdown was the easiest way to respond – just shut the doors and do nothing. I like spending time at home with my family, so my life hasn't changed that much, but there was always the possibility of doing something else, there was a sense of freedom. The isolation is in our minds.

**IB:** The responses of the society are unpredictable and I think what's interesting about the project is that we try to embrace this unpredictability. We don't know what words people will send us, we don't know how the composition will sound, we don't know how we'll be able to reach people with it and how they will respond. Maybe we will send the composition back to the participants and they will play it on their computers, and this might relate them to their previous visits to the Pavilion.

**KK:** These possible extensions of the composition are fascinating. It's important that this project is open to any and all reactions. We are living in an era of numerous protests, the global situation causes not only loneliness or sadness, but also anger. I'm interested in the shadow space between the words – the space for reaction, and in a situation which is not really planned and organised.

**MS:** Have you already chosen your own word?

**KK:** Yes. This project is not about life, it is life itself. And I feel alive when I'm laughing, so my word will be “laugh”.

**IB:** Yes, this is a really great word for me too. “Laugh” or “laughter”.

**MS:** For me it's “empathy”. Right now we need it more than ever. This is just a word, but it starts with being calmer and better to each other, to have more patience. I hope that it will stay with us after the pandemic.