

# “ ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISM IS THIS KIND OF UTOPIAN VISION – A POLITICAL OR IDEOLOGICAL VISION – OF ENGINEERING A SOCIETY ON A GLOBAL SCALE... AND SEEING IT FAIL. ”



Design critic Jennifer Leonard recently spoke with Chicago-based artist Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, who addresses notions of social engagement with public space through photography, video installations and sculpture. Lately, he has done so by incorporating climatological events and the architecture of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as metaphors for our current state of globalization. This month, a new installation opens at Germany's Krefelder Kunstmuseum.

**JL:** The first two films in your trilogy [*Le Baiser/ The Kiss and Climate*] challenge the modernist notion of universal, or culturally neutral, space. By contrast, the third piece, *Alltagszeit (In Ordinary Time)*, a video work originally commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Architecture, has the unintended effect of celebrating it. How does this make you feel?

**IMO:** I'm not comfortable with it, because it confuses my antagonistic relationship with modernist architecture. *Alltagszeit* looks at the notion of connectivity in free and open space, then attempts to create moments of meeting. Although there are ever-present incidents of isolation and non-communication, the

space is somehow elevated into a spiritual site. It's actually the piece I feel strangest about, because it's the one that has less of a critical edge toward the architectural setting.

**JL:** Who are the main players in this film?

**IMO:** In *Alltagszeit*, the most obvious player is the building – the unmovable. The elements moving through the space are the passage of time and the individual [actor]. This place just becomes a stage for a glorious but mundane event: the passage of time. And so, although it's a sublime work of art and engineering, I celebrate not the space itself but our disruption of it. It's our very movement and inhabitation of these spaces that collide with that engineering, break it down, make it dirty, or begin to reuse it in unique ways. I hope that what becomes spectacular is not the concrete [structure] but the ephemerality of human experience.

**JL:** Or, in the case of *Iceberg r11i01* and *Vanishing Sky* [new installations that were on show for the first time this spring at the Art Institute of Chicago], the ephemerality of natural phenomena.

**IMO:** Right. *Iceberg r11i01* is based on fact. It's a rapid-prototype sculpture based on a scan of an iceberg off the coast of Labrador. *Vanishing Sky*, on the other hand, comes from an entirely fictitious source. It's a three-channel video projection that generates an entire universe of stars every 15 minutes. These are based on a set of fractal equations and algorithms derived from a mathematical code, which is itself derived from the Sanskrit scripture that J. Robert Oppenheimer referenced upon witnessing the world's first atomic blast: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

**JL:** What is your current relationship with modernist architecture?

**IMO:** Love-hate. Coming to grips with an attraction, trying to find the political underpinnings of that work, and trying to inject politics into my own work. That same sort of attraction is also part of my attraction to architectural modernism, which is this kind of utopian vision – a political or ideological vision – of engineering a society on a global scale.

**JL:** Like a universal code.

**IMO:** And seeing it fail. Seeing it fail in my own city now, in Chicago. When I first came to Chicago, at age seven, my parents took my brother and me to these glass apartment buildings – they were this new thing. I come from a family in Spain, where we would see millennia of architecture, from Celtic to Moorish to colonial, and so forth. In Chicago, our contemporary condition is that we are embracing a myth of progress. This myth is sold to us. It is one of high speed, interconnectivity, simultaneous and rapid exchange of ideas, commerce, products. What that does is create one large space, rather than modular units that can be replicated everywhere for the Everyman. It creates one interconnected space and supposedly levels difference. And it also sells itself as a non-ideological sort of space, like the Miesian space – one that purported to be transparent and have no ideology.

**JL:** How does your other work compare with your latest, *The Krefeld Suite* [a site-specific installation at two 1928 Mies villas in Krefeld, Germany]?

**IMO:** These are near-identical works at Mies's Haus Lange and Haus Esters, for which I'm using a series of large-format photographs, in conjunction with the original furniture draped in white silk. [The silk refers to the villas' original clients, owners of large silk manufacturing companies in Krefeld.] Where I've inadvertently mapped out space in *Alltagszeit* and presented it in a Miesian ideal, *The Krefeld Suite* is demanding of the space. It's challenging, it's reductive, and it sets up the viewer as the protagonist.