

Collages  
Julie Rafalski



# Collages

**Julie Rafalski**

Skwer, Warsaw  
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With an essay by  
**Alex Urso**

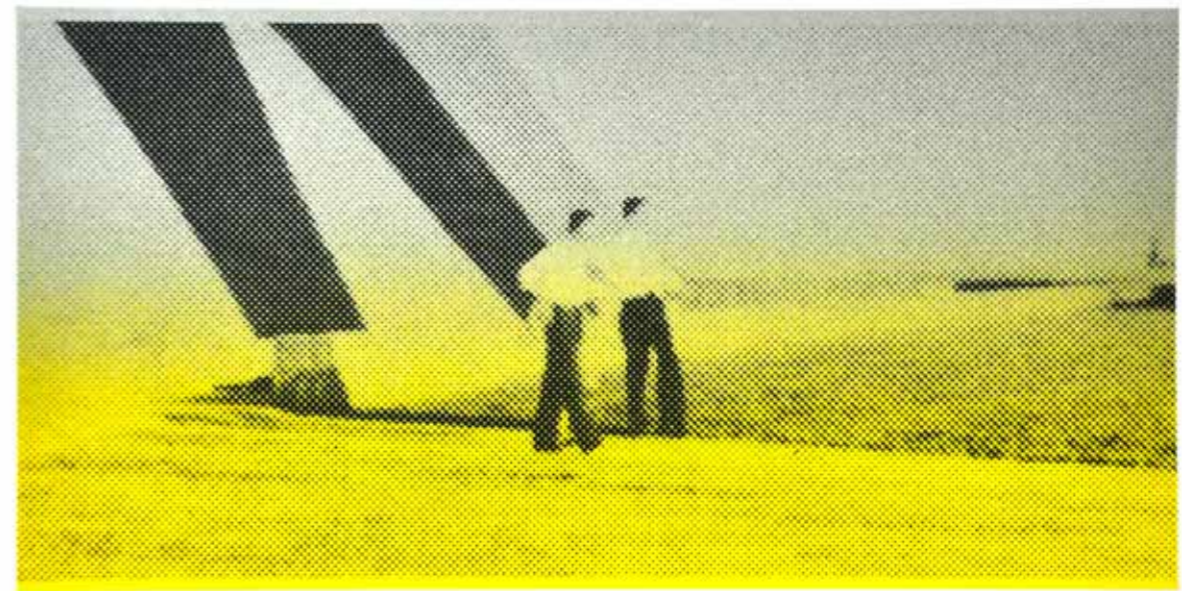


### Rip

Cyanotype, 25 x 18cm, Edition of 10, 2011

A torn cover of a book about modern architecture was photographed and printed using the cyanotype printing process. The depicted building is the Alvorada Palace, designed by Oscar Niemeyer in 1958. Also named "Palace of the Dawn", it was said to herald the dawning of a new era in Brazil.

The cyanotype process, one of the earliest photographic processes, was used in the Victorian era for printing images in books and making blueprints. This process predates the modern era, yet the Alvorada Palace on this torn-out cover, starts to resemble a ruin.



### Some People in the Encyclopedia of Architecture

Silkscreen, 64 x 36cm, Edition of 10, 2011

In this silkscreen print, an image from a 1963 edition of *The Encyclopedia of Architecture* was cropped and enlarged to highlight the figures merely intended for scale. The architecture in these re-framed images becomes a backdrop for the figures who have now been placed centre-stage. These prints explore the relationship between a human scale and a grand architectural vision.

## The Artistic Citation as Creative Sabotage

Alex Urso

We may not realize it, but  
our heads are full of relationships.

-L. Ghirri

Take, dislocate, decontextualise. The history of art has always been characterised by a continuing need, on the part of artists, to look at the past in order to reinterpret, directly or indirectly, its authors and forms of tradition. Regardless of the age, artists have always looked back, driven by the desire to recover the shapes of others, appropriating the visual elements only to reinsert them into their own works in a completely natural way. A “stainless steal,”<sup>1</sup> in which the present draws from and looks at the past, while preserving the difference, remains bound to the contemporary, prospecting for the future.

This constant dialogue between the ages, which operates in different ways and approaches depending on the historical period, has always deemed the picture an “anachronistic” product - a container of experiences that communicates at a distance, a receptacle that encloses within it various and mixed differentials of time. The interpretation of the work follows the same anachronistic condition in the divergence of time: “In front of an image, however old it may be, the present never fails to reconfigure. (...) In front of an image, no matter how recent it is, the past at the same time never fails to reconfigure itself, since that image becomes thinkable only in the construction of memory.”<sup>2</sup>

In this perspective, the quote becomes doubly necessary and constructive if it is to be seen as an instrument aimed to strengthen, through a comparison with the past, the cultural and political values of the moment. Moreover, according to the thought of Giorgio Agamben, it can only be seen if at the same time we are able to see the past. The displacement of having two differing times in one work allows us to look at and understand the present through this phase shift.

The work of Julie Rafalski enters into this “gap,” which is characterised by constant attention to the forms and figures of the art canon. The strong attraction to the study and reinterpretation of past authors is a constant that characterises the entire research of this young Polish-American artist. The search, which is always elegant, dosed, and never invasive, aims to reinforce dialogue with history in an uninterrupted continuity, weaving and binding the works; as, for example, was implemented in the series of prints entitled *Projections* (2014), dedicated to Mies van der Rohe - German architect and designer considered among the pioneers of modernist architecture. These large prints show images of interiors designed by Mies, modified through the addition of brightly overlying shapes. Specifically, black and white photos extracted from the architect's old monographs are looted and the superimposition of luminously-colored geometric forms hinders the reading.

The pearly color of the shapes overlaid on the interiors also create an interference, not only visually,

but also purely conceptually. Through her use of intense colors, Rafalski challenges with irony the absolutism of the rigorous structures so dear to Mies, as well as the black and white tendency that characterized the aesthetic of the German architect, therefore remedying the “lack of humanity and humour” - to quote the words of the artist herself - that modernist architecture was accustomed to.

In this way, Julie Rafalski allows the creation of a third semantic context, in addition to the one inherited from Mies and the artist's own: the establishment of an open space, in which opposing forces meet and live with each other, face to face, conversing, or even exchanging places.

When viewing the works of Julie Rafalski singularly, it seems that every image presents itself as a container, a *summa* of different interferences, an “archive”. This term pertains to Foucault's own usage, to stand for “the system that governs the appearance of statements,” which structures the specific expressions of a particular period.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, an archive is neither affirmative nor critical per se; it simply supplies the terms of discourse.

Accordingly, Rafalski's strength lies fully in the delicacy through which this discourse, or preferably “conversation” with the masters of the past, is proposed: the interaction between different figures looks like a fun challenge, which does not suggest a cheeky comparison, but strongly encourages a communicative exchange.

This is evident, for example, in the series of collages *Dear Mondrian* (2012), which were made by overlaying sheets of coloured gels on pages extracted from a monograph of the Dutch painter: Rafalski's chromatic forms, in this case, mimic and destructure the renowned rectangular planes of Mondrian, conversing with them and defying the formal balance.

The idea behind the work lies in the will to give a new meaning to the strict reading of Mondrian's paintings, as grids that appear impenetrable owing to their rigidity and that seem to omit any human element. It's here that Rafalski's intervention can be found, producing a functional linguistic interference, creating a new interpretation of the work, overlaying colors, disturbing the strict plans of the Dutch artist with unexpected geometrical interferences. In this way, the interpretation of the paintings leans toward diverting nuances, giving way to light, play and humour.

It is to a great extent, as can be observed on many other occasions, that the artistic research of Julie Rafalski is dictated, more than through any other stimulus, by music. It can be easily recognized that the artist's stance as a lover of jazz - and it could not be otherwise, considering she spent many years in Chicago, a city that recognizes the music's indubitable worth - influences her creative practice, which seems to be driven by a continuous desire to experiment, mix new media, and develop creative processes based on melodic, colorful and playful lines.



Besides, what else makes jazz if not its continual development repeated through the practice of improvisation and set themes modulated in various ways each time? The similarities in Rafalski's work are obvious: the re-interpretation of past artists is equivalent to a *performance* in which, although based on works from established tradition, their visual appearance is reformulated, directing them to different frequencies each time.

#### **The *difference in the repetition*, always**

By retracing the thought of Gilles Deleuze, we understand the history of modern art as a great visual container dominated by repeated artistic gestures. Starting from Heidegger's thought, in his text from 1968 *Difference and Repetition*, the French author argues that the concepts of difference and repetition have replaced those of identical and negative, of identity and contradiction, of the Hegelian matrix. No longer a comparison between "new" and "old", but a coexistence of both within the work.

This coexistence of the dimension of the past with the present, however, must always be characterised – according to Deleuze – from one semantic gap that preserves, in the repetition of forms, the minimum difference needed to bring something original to history.

Considering that the contemporary world is operating on an overdose of visual products – Lawrence Alloway spoke of "aesthetics of plenty" to describe the visual culture since the early seventies, characterised by

an inflation of images that, for the first time, invade each person's life with such a flow – it is therefore necessary that the artist, who himself can succumb to kleptomaniacism from this boundless visual space that is the history of art, always preserves his own touch, a kind of personal intervention characterizing his own vision of the work, differentiating the sense anew.

This application of sampling and rephrasing is the force of Rafalski. Her research consists of a continuous and meticulous observation among the folds of art history, looking for affinities with authors on which the artist models and pours her own experience; her own reworking, that does not stop on a simple reproposal – repetition – of the works and fragments passed, but goes beyond, reaching a necessary transformation to witness the action of the present. An example of this is *Some People in the Encyclopedia of Architecture* (2011), five silkscreen prints of images taken from an old book of architecture cropped and enlarged. These fragments show human figures: in the book they are considered as a simple contour detail in the architecture of Marcel Breuer (amongst others), but here become protagonists of the scene by occupying the space and finally claiming their centrality. In this way, the artist's intention seems to explore the bizarre relationships that exist between the great modernist architectural vision and the human dimension, often pandered to or even excluded from the environment.

The critical study of modernist architecture continues, in the small fragment of paper *Rip* (2011), a scrap ripped off from the aforementioned book about

architecture, that is photographed and printed using the cyanotype process. The building depicted in the work is the Alvorada Palace in Brazil, designed by Oscar Niemeyer in 1958. Barely visible, blurred and lost in the suffused atmosphere of the print, the building appears as a relic of a bygone era, a metaphor of a modernist dream overwhelmed by the ruins of the time. Constructed to herald the dawn of a new age in Brazil, the structure becomes, in the eyes of Rafalski, a monument of defeating - or overcoming - the modernist utopia. Also in this case, the citation is used as a critical operation of linguistic comparison. A comparison that safeguards the present, preserving a minimum “difference” after its appropriation of the past, whilst leaving the artist firm in the contemporary. In line with Baudelaire’s definition, the “memory”<sup>4</sup> here becomes a force that does not impose itself on the present to stifle it, but to enable a conceptual process that actualizes the present, and becomes open to the future.

If nothing new is implied in playing with the authors of the past, the ability to present a new implementation rests on elegance and sensitivity, precisely the way Rafalski’s research can be characterized. Every interaction with an artist of the canon manifests itself as an accurate dialogue, always open, often amused, but never intrusive.

In this case, discretion and finesse grant the attainment of the aforementioned difference, which is necessary for the comparison of the past to the present to be realized in a productive way, allowing for the generation of something new through repetition.

translated by Agnieszka Dudek

1 Leo Steinberg, “The Glorious Company,” in *Art about Art*, ed. J. Lipman and R. Mitchell (New York, 1978)

2 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Historie de l’art et anachronisme des images*, Editions de Minuit (Paris, 2000)

3 Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” translation appears as an appendix to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972)

4 “Memory,” Baudelaire writes “is the great criterion of art; art is the mnemotechny of the beautiful”. What he infers is that a work in an artistic tradition should evoke the memory of major precedents in this tradition as its ground or support. However, the work must not be overwhelmed by these precedents: it must activate the memory of such important images subliminally drawing on them, disguising them, transforming them.

**Dear Mondrian V**  
Collage, 22 x 31cm, 2012

This series of nine collages comprises of pages cut out from a Mondrian monograph, with coloured gels layered over the images. The gel colours mimic Mondrian's red, blue and yellow while the gel shapes challenge his rectangular planes, establishing a playful dialogue with Mondrian's visual language.

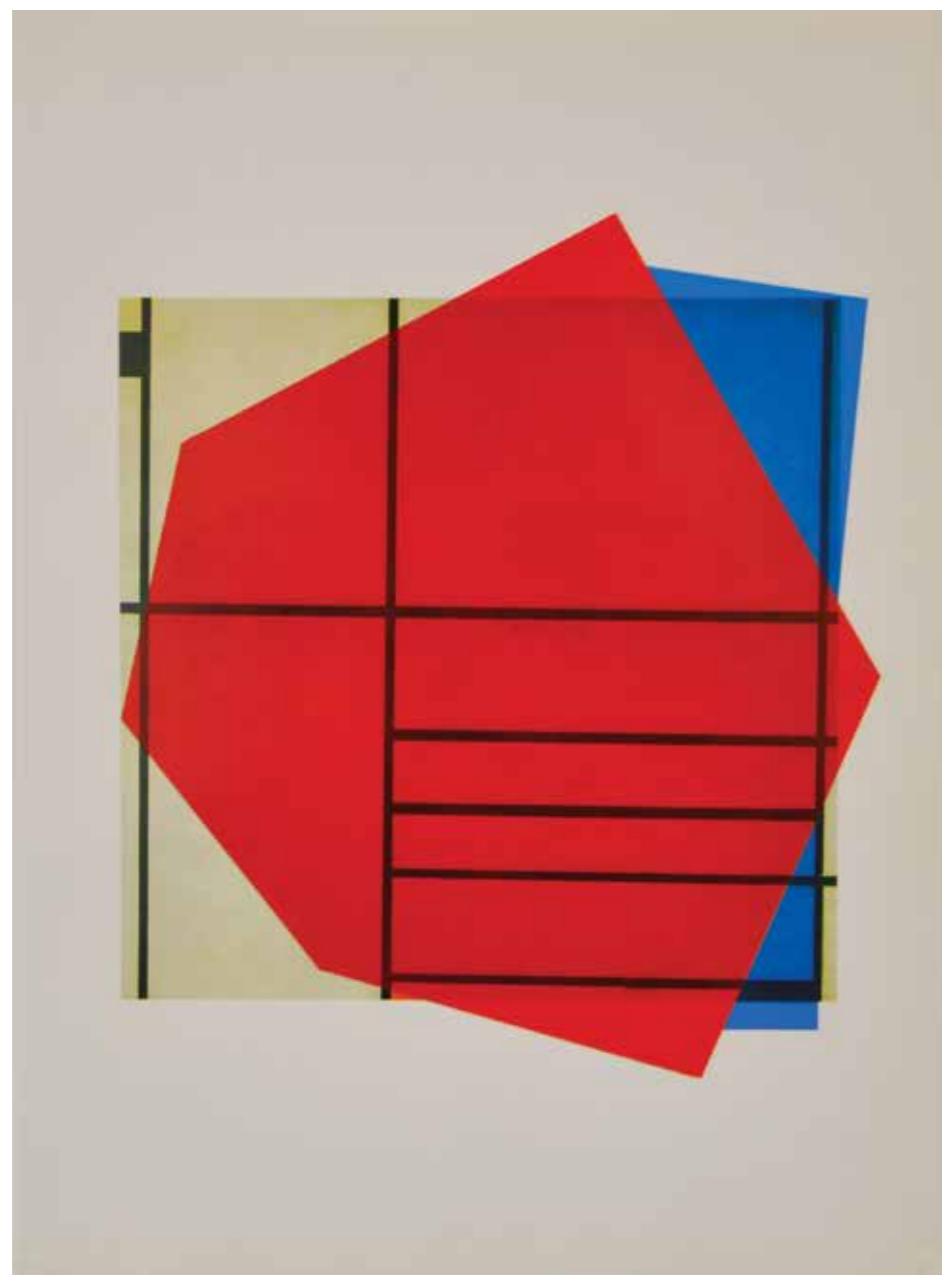


*this page:*  
**Dear Mondrian I, IV**  
Collage, 22 x 31cm, 2012





**Dear Mondrian VIII**  
Collage, 22 x 31cm, 2012



*this page:*  
**Dear Mondrian VII, II**  
Collage, 22 x 31cm, 2012



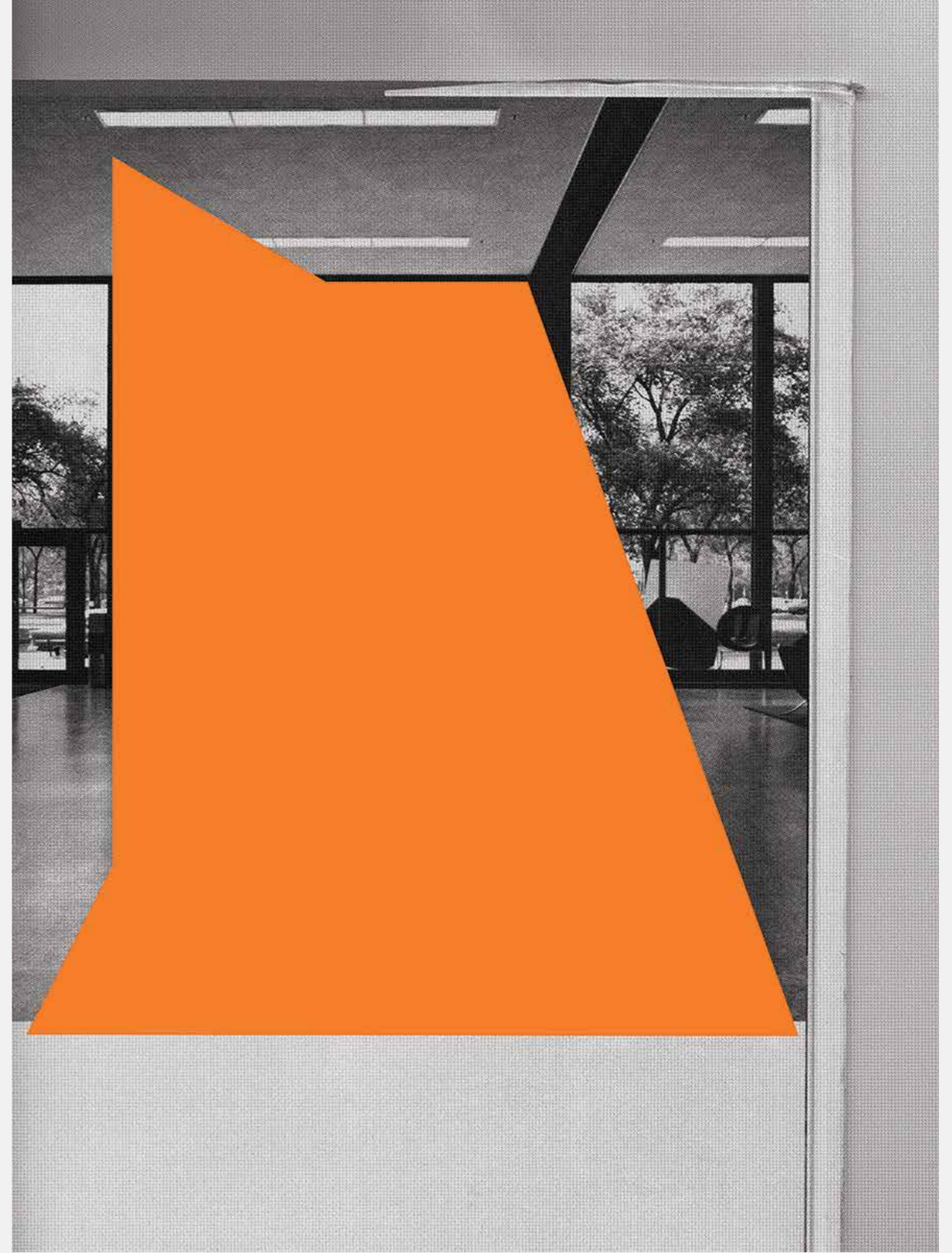
## Projections I - V

Giclee print, 106 x 79cm, Series of 5, Edition of 3, 2014

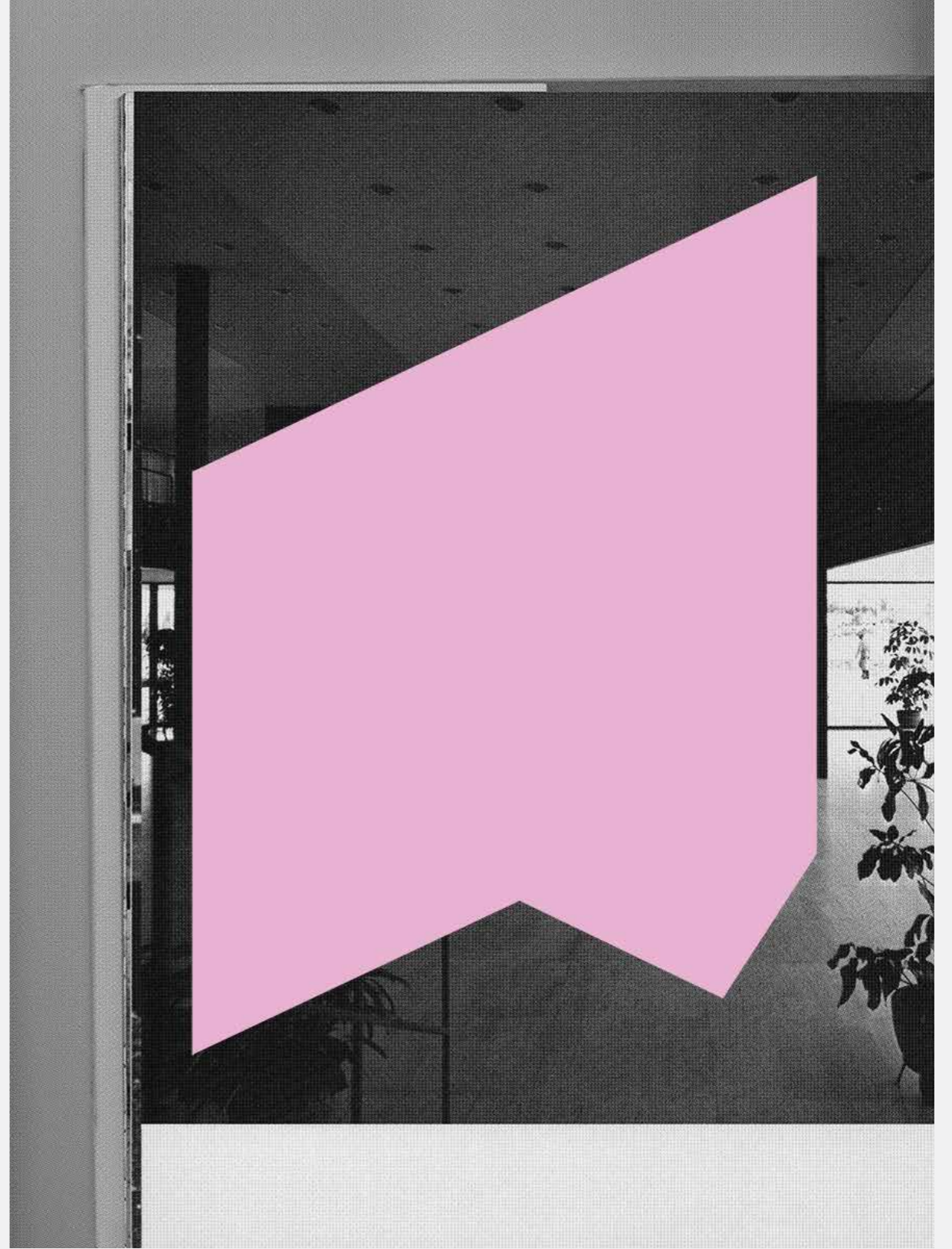
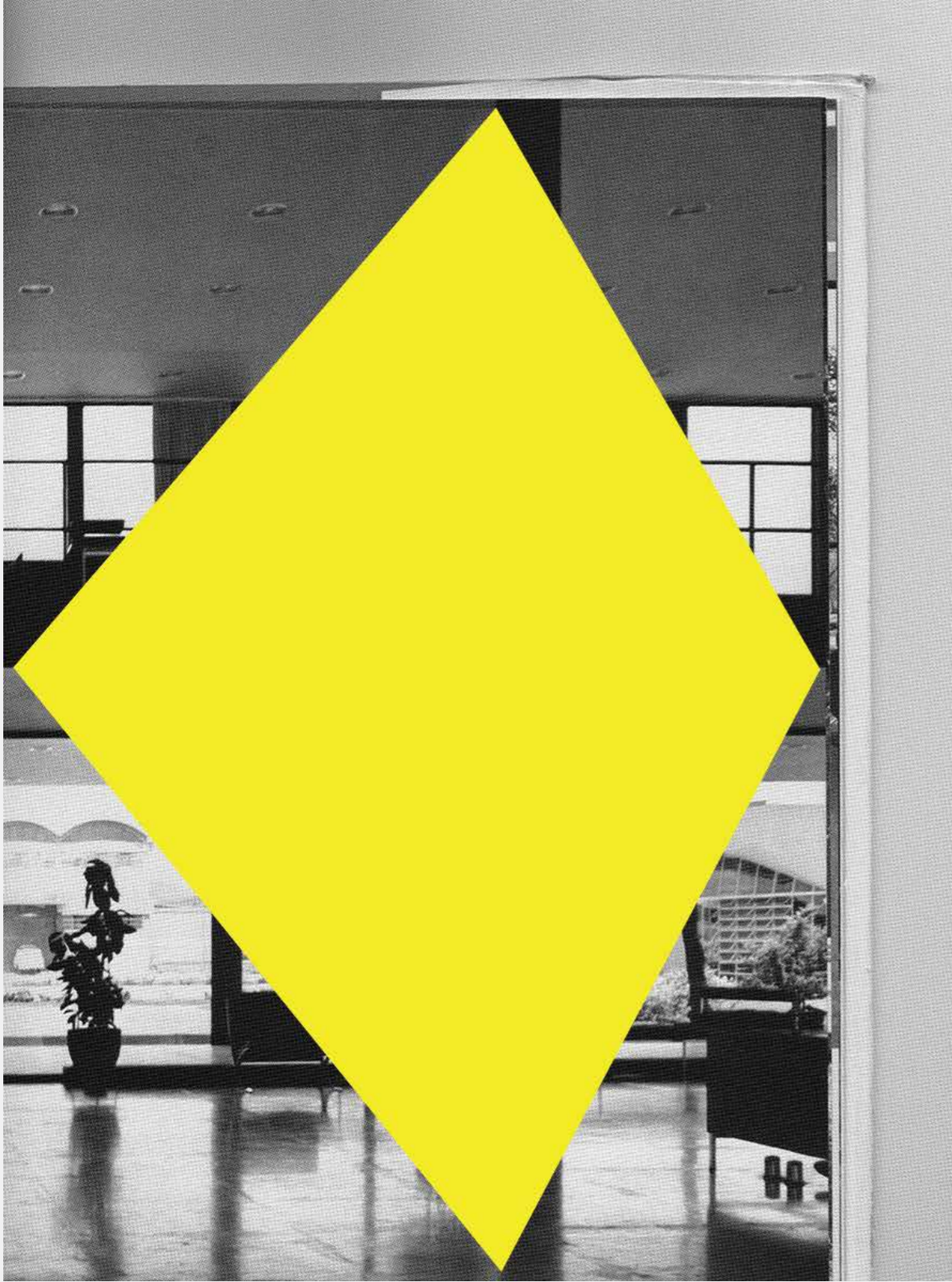
In *Projections*, a series of large prints, images of Mies van der Rohe's interiors have been overlaid with brightly-colored geometric shapes that cut into the architectural space and demarcate a superimposed space. These shapes, in dialogue with van der Rohe's architectural language, are a silhouette outline of an imaginary, alternative space.















BARCELONA PAVILION  
Giclee print, vinyl, frame  
59 x 84cm  
2014

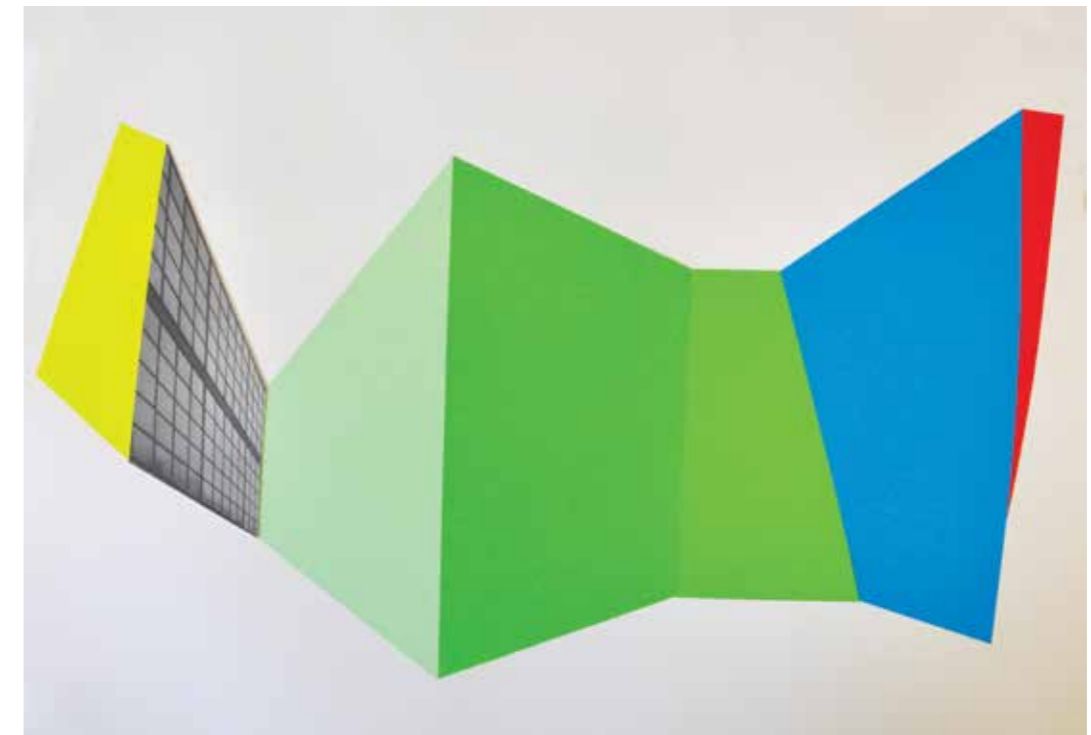
A giclee print of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion is partially wrapped around an empty frame. The two dimensional surface of the image is emphasized. The print casts a shadow into the frame's non-neutral green matt board, creating a stage-like space.



FARNSWORTH HOUSE  
Giclee print, vinyl, frame  
59 x 84cm  
2014

A framed print of van der Rohe's Farnsworth House is wrapped in vinyl. The vinyl obscures the house from view, leaving only a narrow portion of a terrace visible. It serves to protect the framed work, yet also to hide it.





UNFOLDING I-III  
Collage  
30 x 42cm  
2014

In this series of collages, a fragment of a Mies van der Rohe building has been 'extended' with coloured shapes that suggest alternative imaginary spaces.

**Alex Urso** (b. 1987) is an Italian artist and independent curator who graduated in Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera, Milan, as well as Literature and Philosophy from the University of Macerata. He collaborates with magazines, writing about art and contemporary culture. He lives and works in Warsaw.

**Julie Rafalski** (b. 1981) in the USA to Polish parents. She obtained a BFA in graphic design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MFA in art at the Slade School of Art in London. Her work has been shown in Copenhagen, Warsaw, Berlin, Tel Aviv, London and Chicago. She has participated in numerous group shows including the *Salon Art Prize Show* (Matt Roberts Gallery, London, 2012), *WW Solo Award Show* (WW Gallery, London, 2012), *Multiplied*, (Christie's London, 2011), *The Royal Academy Summer Show* (2011) and the *Liverpool Biennale* (2006). Her solo exhibitions include *Not in View* at the Westminster Reference Library Gallery in London and *Projections* at Studio Wooden Gallery in Chicago. She lives and works in London.

julierafalski.com  
info@julierafalski.com

