



EDITH: AN
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORY

NORA WENDL



Edith: An Architectural History

An installation by
Nora Wendl

January 19 — February 25, 2023
List Gallery, Swarthmore College





A HOUSE, an ARCHIVE

by Brian Goldstein

There are two prevailing histories of the Edith Farnsworth House, the minimalist glass-and-steel pavilion that sits elevated in a grassy meadow along the Fox River in Plano, Illinois. One is a history of design. In 1945, Dr. Edith Farnsworth, a Chicago physician specializing in nephritis, a kidney disease, met the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe at a party. Soon to complete purchase of the riverside property about an hour west of her Chicago home, Farnsworth hired Mies, who had built a reputation as one of the world’s leading modern architects before emigrating from Germany to the United States in 1938. Casting about for a client who would enable him to make his first major American architectural statement, Mies found an ideal partner in Farnsworth, who was educated, affluent, urbane, and lived alone, a combination of factors that he took as license to experiment.

The result took shape as three horizontal planes connected unobtrusively by white-painted I-beams, enclosed with façade-spanning glass. The transparent elevation had a plan to match: an open interior without any interruptions except for the core that contained bathrooms and kitchen, and patios that brought the space-without-walls outdoors. When completed in 1951, the house struck Mies’s profession like a bolt of lightning. It was, *Architectural Forum* declared in October 1951, “the most important house completed in the U.S. since Frank Lloyd Wright built his desert home in Arizona [Taliesin West] a dozen years ago.”¹ Already the centerpiece of a 1947 Museum of Modern Art exhibition celebrating Mies, the house would become a mainstay in architectural history textbooks and one of the most famous houses in the world. Even before construction was complete, people flocked to see it.

The other prevailing history of the Farnsworth House is more prosaic: a history of inhabitation. Edith Farnsworth moved into her new home in 1951. It remained her weekend retreat for nearly twenty years, despite unwelcome visits by photographers and onlookers, and also despite three years of legal battles with Mies, who sued her as soon as she moved in, claiming unpaid fees, while Farnsworth countersued, demanding compensation for cost overruns. Farnsworth’s taste differed from that of typical Americans—she selected modern furniture designed by Jens Risom and Florence Knoll, for example.

Yet the things she did here were quite familiar: she had neighbors over for meals, read the many books she kept on the shelves she added, slept, listened to music, and chain smoked. She played with her dogs and wrote poems. She shifted furniture around and added blinds. She moved through the house, making it—despite all of its unusual qualities—a home. Over two decades, she shaped and reshaped its spaces through her occupation and use. In 1971, she sold the house and moved to Italy.

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In a body of work that has spanned two decades, and which forms the subject of *Edith: An Architectural History*, Nora Wendl has dwelled in the friction between these two narratives of this single house. Through a series of artistic responses and extensive prose, too, Wendl has worked to correct a record that from the late 1940s has elevated Mies at Farnsworth’s expense and, in doing so, has elevated his brief engagement as designer at the expense of her far longer history as dweller. This balance, off center from the earliest moments of the house, tipped quickly to one side after Peter Palumbo bought it from Farnsworth. Replacing her furniture with iconic works by Mies, the house became effectively a museum to Mies. Mythology took over. Edith Farnsworth as enduring resident and owner faded away to an image of Farnsworth as client, and an often inconvenient one at that. Farnsworth had tried to stand in the way of Mies’s ideals, the story went. Farnsworth was portrayed as a jilted lover of the architect (a story that all evidence suggests is untrue), and the irrelevant occupant of a masterwork, at most a barrier to his purist vision. Accounts contended that the lawsuits (which ended in a modest settlement in Mies’s favor) were in the architect’s case a demand for adequate respect, and in the client’s case, the result of sour grapes, her effort to undermine Mies’s reputation.

Such mythologized narratives are both patriarchal and factually incorrect. As Wendl has written, they turned “Farnsworth into a character, one who fits into a plotline that favors her ‘justified’ disappearance from the house and the discourse of architectural history.”² Wendl’s List Gallery exhibition, *Edith: An Architectural History*, is part of her ongoing effort to make Farnsworth into more than a flat character. In Wendl’s work, Farnsworth becomes instead a complex individual, who was not a mere patron for a prominent architect, but a major force in shaping the history of the house she commissioned—both as a client who influenced its design and an occupant who continued to define it long after its



Demystifying this house, despite—or, indeed, because of—its immense fame becomes a crucial task in order to more accurately tell the history of the built environment. Seeing this as not just the Farnsworth House but as Edith Farnsworth’s house takes the house out of amber. It animates it, allowing the house to be a house, kinetic not static, in motion not still.

architect left the scene. More than that, Farnsworth was an intellectual equal of her architect, a woman who bucked nearly every convention of the 1940s and 1950s and whose occupation and taste defined her as a modern too, even if she was not always willing to go along with the austere preferences of Mies. Ironically, Farnsworth has been largely displaced from the narrative of her own weekend house. Putting her back in it, Wendl argues, “refutes the historical, canonical narrative” of the house.³

Wendl’s work is not only a recovery project for a single house, however. It is also a broader historiographical recovery project, an effort to consider and reshape how architectural history is typically told. Is architectural history the history of a building’s architect or of its inhabitants? For much of the field’s history, the answer has been the former, and historians have emphasized stylistic and aesthetic appearances,

formal innovation, and architecture as the creation of a single individual or, at best, a firm. This is especially the case for structures like the Farnsworth House, a building whose designer has been so heroized as to be deemed one of the three “master builders” of modern architecture.⁴ The notion of the master builder adopts many of the tropes of the “great man” approach to history writ large, rendering Mies larger than life—a man determined to realize his vision despite any barrier. As one of the most prominent works in his oeuvre and his most renowned building in the U.S., the Farnsworth House has become a synecdoche for its designer. A “masterwork,” it too has gained a heroic status that reproduces a narrative of architecture as the product of creative individualistic brilliance, this despite the field’s extraordinarily collaborative, social nature and the fact that buildings continue to change long after initial completion.

Increasingly, architectural historians are crafting multi-dimensional accounts that not only consider architects but also the many other diverse players who transform the built environment. White, male architects and builders may have shaped the dominant forms of postwar American domesticity, a reality in the Levittowns and along the Fox River, too. But the people who made and remade those homes thereafter were often women, a story that was true even in an exceptional case like the Farnsworth House. Demystifying this house, despite—or, indeed, because of—its immense fame becomes a crucial task in order to more accurately tell the history of the built environment. Seeing this as not just the Farnsworth House but as Edith Farnsworth’s house takes the house out of amber. It animates it, allowing the house to be a house, kinetic not static, in motion not still.

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But how does one tell a kinetic history of a house? The task is harder than it seems, even for a place as well documented as the Farnsworth House. Archives mirror the larger biases of historical fields; they carry the traces of hero worship too. Witness the archival evidence in this case, for example. Mies’s papers at the Library of Congress comprise 27 linear feet. At the Art Institute of Chicago, researchers will find an additional four linear feet of materials. The Canadian Centre for Architecture holds 1,300 items in its collection relating to Mies’s professional work and teaching. The holdings of Mies’s drawings at the Museum of Modern Art are enough to fill twenty published catalog volumes. In contrast, the entirety of Edith Farnsworth’s papers, held at Chicago’s Newberry Library, encompass only 2.6 linear feet.

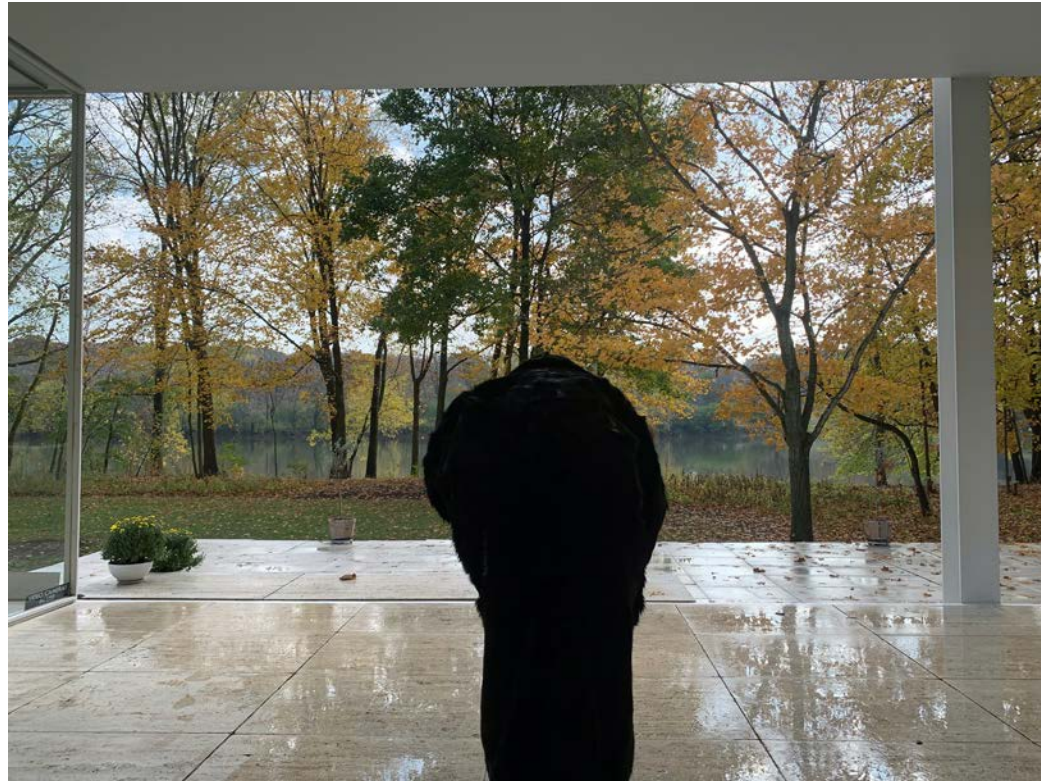
The design of this house is documented amply and carefully by several of the major archival institutions in North America. Accounts of Edith Farnsworth’s residence here, in contrast, are fleeting and comparatively absent. Telling her story fully requires other means.

Finding such means defines Wendl’s task, and *Edith* provides but a glimpse into this task. While Wendl has carefully combed the conventional archives that record Farnsworth’s story, for her the house is itself an archive and the artist is, in this case, an architectural historian. Seeing the house as archive, one could read it for inert clues—study its material details, for example. But to see its history as an active, inhabited space, to find the traces of Edith Farnsworth living in her house, one must set it in motion, Wendl contends. The thread that joins the works in Edith is that act of setting in motion, a task that Wendl carries out, in part, by physically inhabiting the house and documenting her embodied interventions. Without Edith present and within the many constraints imposed by the house, its mythology, and those who maintain that mythology, Wendl unearths the stories within and between walls, on chairs and in beds, on tables, and across floors. Performance reveals the traditional archive’s deficits while simultaneously mining the house as a fruitful archive of its longtime resident’s acts of dwelling.

Time-based media and its documentation carry these performances beyond the home itself, allowing us to imagine Edith Farnsworth as the main character again. The exhibition charts this task through three major bodies of work, each preoccupied with a different facet of the house’s history. The first of these, documented through photographs, finds Wendl in and around the house as it has been presented for most of its post-1971 history. In a series of images titled *I Listened* (2017), Wendl repeats the ordinary, often banal activities that would have made up Farnsworth’s typical days: lying on the bed, sitting at a coffee table to enjoy a cocktail, passing through the kitchen. Without the artist’s face visible, the viewer inevitably transposes her and Farnsworth, yet something is off. Moving among the Mies-designed furniture that Farnsworth never actually used, they (both Wendl and Farnsworth) effect a haunting of the house’s post-Farnsworth history, forcing the viewer to imagine the house not as an unchanging museum but as a space of living, even despite the effort to erase Farnsworth from the interior.

In *I Listened*, blue booties serve as reminders of the restrictions on the artist’s use of the house, now managed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In *Equine in Features* (2021, pages 18–21),





. . . a dark blot that renders part of the house and its famed river view unseeable. We have to see Farnsworth first, the image suggests, before we can gawk at its forms.

Wendl carries out another act of personification that likewise abuts the restrictions visitors to the house must navigate, but she takes this haunting outside. Here, Wendl, again faceless, wears a pony coat that once belonged to her great-aunt who, like Farnsworth, lived alone. The coat, made from a favorite pony, likewise recalls a story in Farnsworth’s memoirs about witnessing someone shooting the horses in a neighboring field. It also recalls Mies biographer Franz Schulze’s description of Farnsworth as “rather equine in features,” a characterization meant to render her unappealing.⁵ In her photographs, Wendl—not allowed inside while wearing the coat—lurks as an inversion of the house: the black, shiny hide contrasts with the house’s matte whiteness and her occupation at ground level violates the house’s aloof levitation. In one photograph (opposite), Wendl stands on the patio, her head ducked down out of view, occupying a space that Farnsworth dwelled in too. With the coat in high contrast, the viewer finds a dark blot that renders part of the house and its famed river view unseeable. We have to see Farnsworth first, the image suggests, before we can gawk at its forms.

The second major body of work in the exhibition reflects Wendl’s recent collaborative efforts to restore Farnsworth’s place in the house, through a multi-year project to replace its historically inaccurate furniture with the items that Farnsworth herself chose for her home. Her film, *The wind has left you a clear echo* (2022), documents the installation that reshaped the house’s interior from March 2020 to December 2021. Wendl, along with Scott Mehaffey and Rob Kleinschmidt, researched the furniture and decor visible in historical photographs, including chaise lounge chairs, dining room furniture, a daybed, and decorative objects. Through simple acts of removal and replacement, they profoundly reframed the house, not as a tribute to Mies’s major furniture designs but instead to Farnsworth’s own comfortable furnishing. *Edith Farnsworth, Reconsidered* revealed the house’s first resident to prefer a warm modernism that enlivened the travertine and glass spaces of the house. Viewing the interior depicted in *The wind has left you* a clear echo allows the viewer to envision Farnsworth back in her space; while physically absent, chairs and beds index her presence. This installation’s impermanence (and its unfortunate timing during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic) serves to illustrate continued tension between understandings of the house as Mies’s and as Edith Farnsworth’s. This remains the case even as Wendl’s efforts have made measurable headway, including with the 2021 formal renaming of the house from the “Farnsworth House” to the “Edith Farnsworth House.”⁶

The third major body of work in the exhibition relates especially to the institutional forms of control that have obscured Edith Farnsworth’s story, determined access to the house and related archives, and influenced public memory of the structure. *I do not remember conversations with the moon* (2019, pages 29–35), a series of prints, and a two-channel film titled *Guard Everything Appropriately and All Will Be Well* (2018, opposite) both relate to the trial transcript of *van der Rohe v. Farnsworth*, the suit and countersuit that became part of the house’s mythology. Wendl only gained access to the transcript, which is almost 4,000 pages in length, after extensively appealing to the only person to hold a copy, an unnamed architect. He allowed her initially to only view it, then finally to scan it with the condition that she could not share it with anyone. The pages and pages of statements tell a story by and about Farnsworth that has been and will remain obscured, known only to the few who have seen the transcript. The document thus symbolizes the broader effort to render Farnsworth unseen—as in the house, she is crucially present in the transcript, yet not allowed to surface. Unable to portray her through the conventional means of the historian, Wendl adopts performance: first through the film, which depicts the artist redacting the transcript line by line, an incessant action that points to concealment as an ongoing process in this story; and, second, through the print series, *I do not remember conversations with the moon*, which reveals only scattered, noncontinuous glimpses of the text through printer’s ink. These partial revelations recall Farnsworth’s identity as a poet. As stitched-together fragments, the words are both cryptic and metaphorical.

Some of these words, perhaps, belong to Edith Farnsworth. We are not allowed to know, but the act of wondering puts her at the center of the story. So too do the gaps that Wendl draws to our attention throughout *Edith*. As much as the house’s spaces of absence were, for Mies, its defining feature, for Wendl they are spaces of motion and inhabitation. Despite erasure, despite redaction, it is here, she reveals, that we can find Edith Farnsworth.

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Endnotes: ¹ “Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House in Fox River, Ill.” *Architectural Forum*, October 1951, 157. ² Nora Wendl, “Guard Everything Appropriately and All Will be Well,” *RA: Revista de Arquitectura* 23 (2021), 21. ³ Nora Wendl, “Uncompromising Reasons for Going West: A Story of Sex and Real Estate, Reconsidered,” *Thresholds* 43 (2015), 23. ⁴ Peter Blake, *Master Builders: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Norton, 1976). ⁵ Schulze quoted in “Uncompromising Reasons for Going West,” 26. ⁶ Nora Wendl, *Edith B. Farnsworth* (Plano, IL: Edith Farnsworth House, 2021).

Opposite: installation view of *Guard Everything Appropriately and All Will be Well*, 2018, Two-Channel HD video with sound, 5 minutes, 36 seconds and Redacted transcript of the trial: *van der Rohe vs. Farnsworth*, 2018, ink on paper, 4,000 pages







I Listened #6, 2017, C-print on glass, 30 x 24 inches



I Listened #5, 2017, C-print on glass, 30 x 24 inches

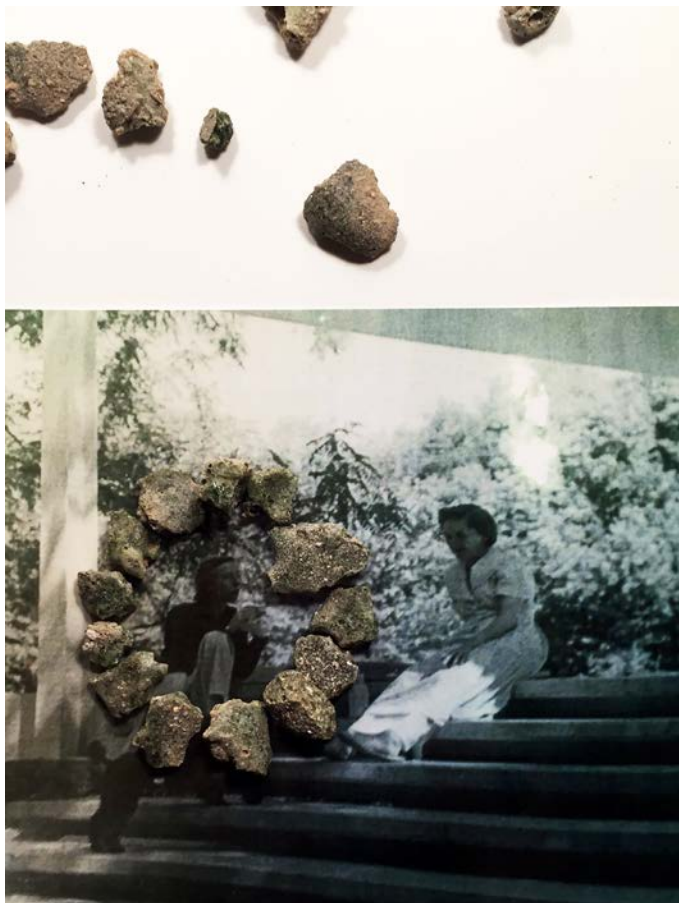






Installation views of: *I Listened #1*, *I Listened #2*, *I Listened #4*, 2017, C-print on chiffon, wooden stairs, each print: 10 x 7 feet

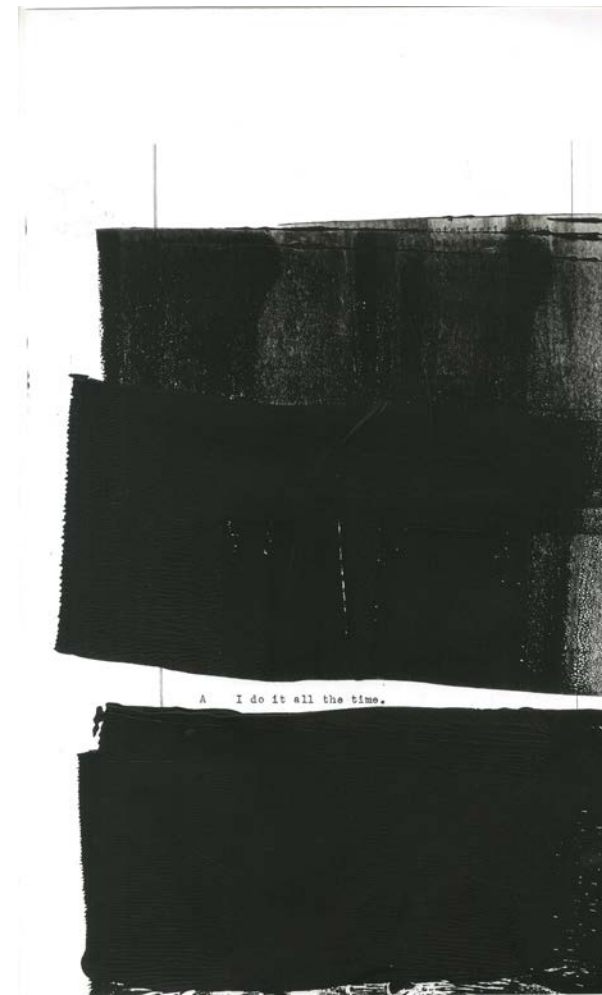


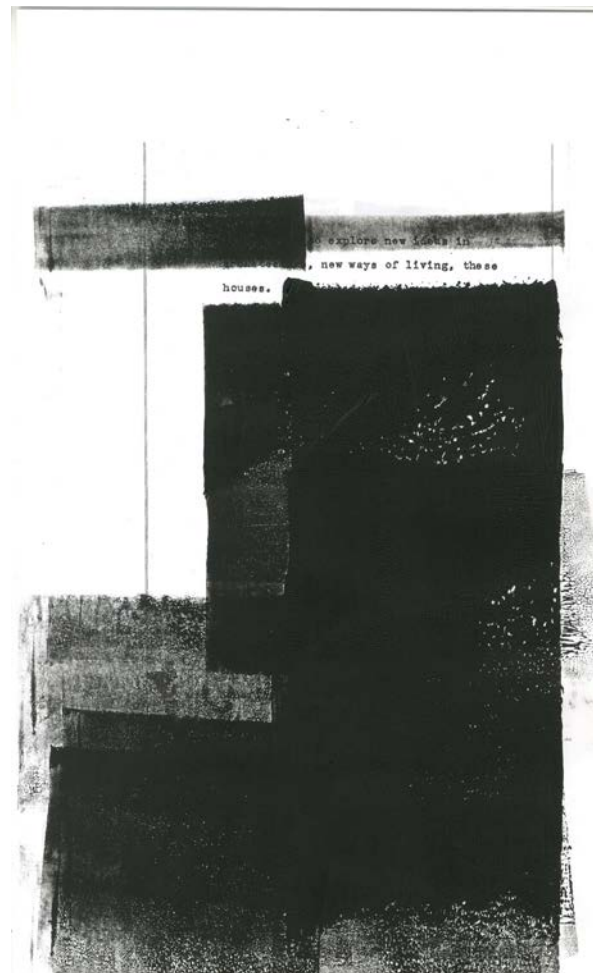






Opposite: installation view of *I do not remember conversations with the moon*, 2019, ink on paper, series of 30 and Redacted transcript of the trial: *van der Rohe vs. Farnsworth*, 2018, ink on paper, 4,000 pages





Nora Wendl

is an associate professor of architecture at the University of New Mexico, where she teaches both architectural design and theory. She is also executive editor of the *Journal of Architectural Education*. She has been awarded grants and residencies by numerous organizations, including the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, the Santa Fe Art Institute, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP). For NTHP, Wendl was content lead and design co-lead for the 2020-2022 exhibition *Edith Farnsworth, Reconsidered*, in which the Farnsworth House was staged as Dr. Farnsworth actually inhabited it in the early 1950s—rebutting the claim that Mies van der Rohe furnished the house. Wendl has also written and published widely, including poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and academic articles that have made their way into popular press. Her most recent publication, “Guard Everything Appropriately and All Will Be Well” in *Revista Arquitectura* (2021), examines the trial transcript from *van der Rohe vs. Farnsworth* and the exhibition *Edith Farnsworth, Reconsidered* as twin artifacts—both representing the same period of time (1951–1954) and both institutionally redacted to “protect” the legacy of the architect. In 2022, Wendl’s book manuscript, *The Edith Project*, was shortlisted for the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize.

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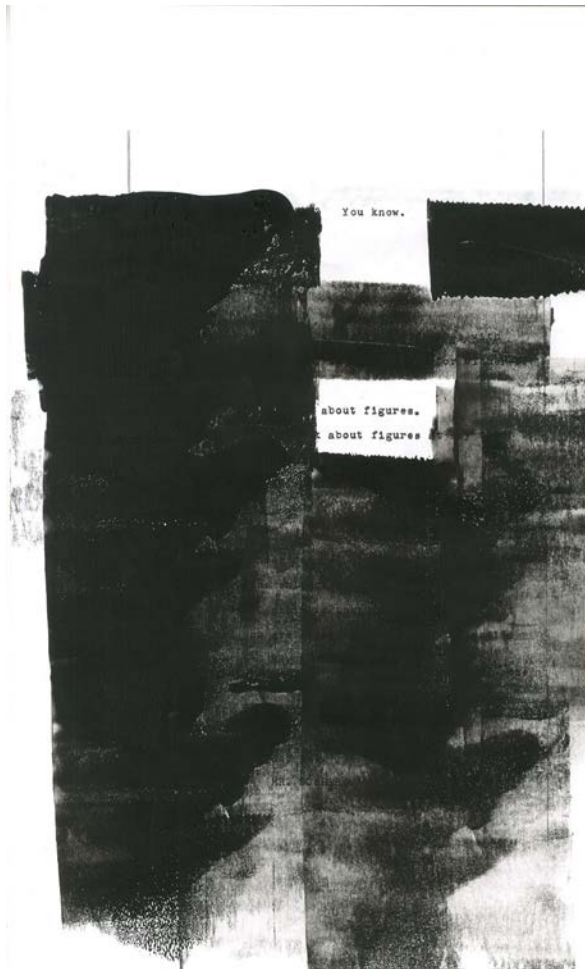
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Opposite: installation view of *Guard Everything Appropriately and All Will be Well*, 2018, Two-Channel HD video with sound, 5 minutes, 36 seconds and Redacted transcript of the trial: *van der Rohe vs. Farnsworth*, 2018, ink on paper, 4,000 pages



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Opposite: *I do not remember conversations with the moon*, 2019, ink on paper, series of 30, 9 ½ x 14 inches each

Back cover: *I Listened #6*, 2017, C-print on glass, 30 x 24 inches

