



IÑIGO MANGLANO-OVALLE

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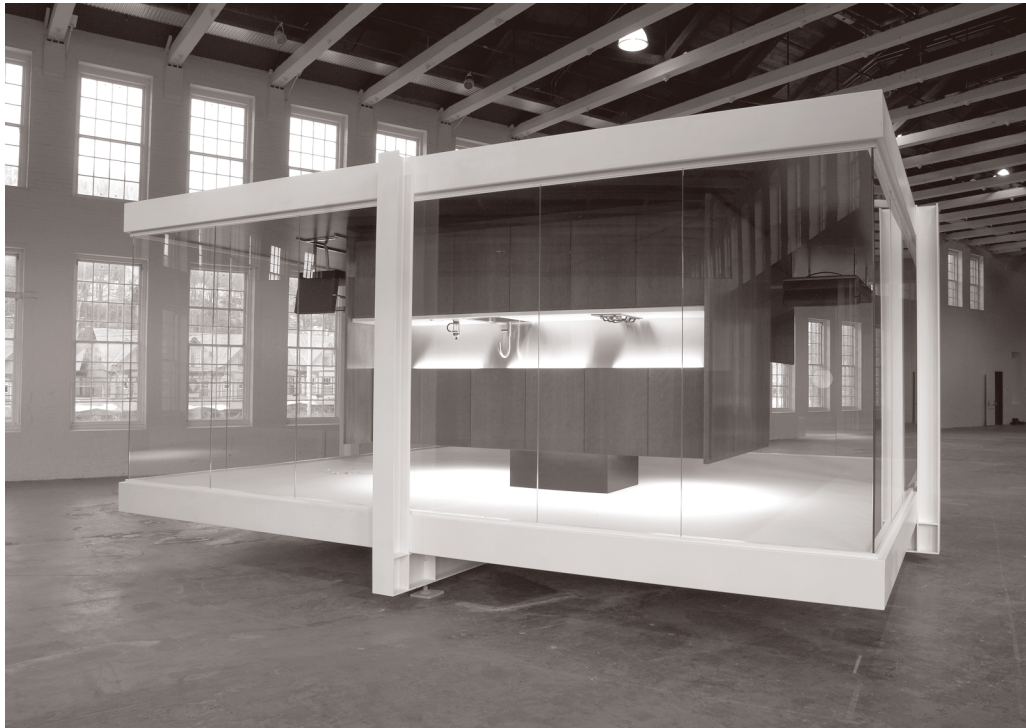
**GRAVITY  
IS A FORCE  
TO BE  
RECKONED  
WITH**

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MASS MoCA



PHOTOS: Art Evans (top), Kevin Kennefick (bottom)



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# YOU SAY YOU WANT A (INFINITE) REVOLUTION

by DENISE MARKONISH, CURATOR, MASS MoCA

**“NOW I’M ALONE AGAIN. THE WIND AND TWILIGHT WERE GRAY, LOW, AND RIGHT OVER YOUR HEAD. DEEP IN THE WET GLASS OF THE SIDEWALK: UPSIDE DOWN LIGHTS AND WALLS, AND FIGURES, MOVING AROUND, FEET UP. THE UNBELIEVABLY HEAVY BUNDLE IN MY HANDS WAS PULLING ME INTO THE DEPTHS, TOWARD THE BOTTOM.” —D-503<sup>1</sup>**

Gravity exists as both a physical force and a feeling of solemnity. In Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle’s project for MASS MoCA, the physics and emotion of it collide, resulting in an upheaval that turns both upside down. What is remarkable about the dualistic definition of gravity is that as natural phenomenon and grave emotion, it remains mysterious. Yet when there is a shift in gravitational force it can be seismic, leading to destruction... or perhaps to freedom.

In *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With* emotion and science are simultaneously inverted and logic therefore challenged. By exposing the tenuous nature of gravity in this work, Manglano-Ovalle emphasizes a shift in perception which transforms the world as we know it, making it transparent, like glass—glass, that “crystal-thin sheet of air in air, to keep air out or to keep it in.”<sup>2</sup> But as you approach Manglano-Ovalle’s

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1. Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Natasha Randall, (New York: The Modern Library), p.183.

2. Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Architectural Record*, 1928





PHOTOS: Kevin Kennefick

glass house, you hear a phone ringing inside, and the series of fragmented calls left to its missing occupant begin to suggest clues. These messages question whether liberation from gravity results in freedom and happiness... or chaos. It soon becomes clear that there are no simple resolutions; in fact no matter how hard you try to find the answer, reach a conclusion, or complete the task, it becomes evident that there is no end, that as one urgent caller states: "...gravity is a force to be reckoned with... and you won't win."<sup>3</sup>

In 1921 Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884–1937) completed the book *We*, said to be one of the first dystopic science fiction novels, predating Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Set in the 26th century, *We* takes the form of a diary written by D-503, an inhabitant of the One State, a society built entirely of glass — its walls, sidewalks, floors and ceilings all transparent. Throughout the narrative D-503 constantly contends with gravity, battling between happiness and freedom — happiness in the One State coming from a kind of lobotomized sameness and freedom consisting of love, imagination and revolution. When D-503 meets the anarchist I-330 all rationality is expelled, and before he knows

it he is plotting to take down the glass walls that surround him. In the end, the walls come down only to go back up again, and D-503 is "cured" when his imagination is surgically removed. In a sense, gravity is restored but revolution is always possible, perpetuating a cycle that remains endless and unfinished.

Just as Zamyatin was describing the One State as a place where citizens "...live in full view, perpetually awash with light, in among our transparent walls, woven from the sparkling air,"<sup>4</sup> architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) was dreaming about skyscrapers. In fact, in the very same year that *We* was completed, Mies created a graphic illustration of a soaring glass skyscraper, an embodiment of Zamyatin's "sparkling air," titled *Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project, Berlin-Mitte, Germany*. The building, at that time, existed more as an idea than a reality, a utopia much like the One State. Mies's visionary concept for the glass skyscraper would remain unrealized until 1951 when his twin 26-story apartment buildings at 860–880 Lake Shore Drive were completed in Chicago, Illinois. At the same time, Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) — who is believed to have read a clandestine copy of *We* and also have seen Mies's skyscraper drawings — was sketching out

the idea for a film set in a glass house. In 1930, Eisenstein would bring his film abstract *The Glass House* to Hollywood. Loosely based on Zamyatin's novel, Eisenstein's film would have been a cultural satire of the United States, a political move that ultimately led to the Paramount studio shelving the project.<sup>5</sup>

These layers of history and influence epitomize 20th-century Modernism, a cultural and artistic movement that sought to break with the past to create a new society built on reductive design and the innovative use of materials and technologies — such as glass and steel construction. The emphasis was often on an economy of means, efficiency and transparency. In past projects Manglano-Ovalle investigated this complex legacy of Modernism, calling into question the political influence of the aesthetic movement. In *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With* Manglano-Ovalle takes particular note of this convergence and uses it to delve into ideas of failed utopias, the act of looking, surveillance and the nature of an unfinished project itself.

Manglano-Ovalle begins his project with a supreme example of the failings of Modernism — the glass house — and even more specifically Mies's *House with Four Columns* (1951). Though this house was never built, Mies designed it as his solution to mass housing; a 50×50-foot glass house that could be built modularly to hold a family of four. The transparent house immediately calls into question the quality of life of its inhabitants (a problem made quite evident in Mies's *Farnsworth House* of 1945–51).<sup>6</sup> Whether in the One State of *We* or the glass architecture of Mies, Modernism also brought with it "Big Brother." Philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) first described this phenomenon as the panopticon: a prison system he theorized, yet, like many utopian ideas, it was never built. This "new" prison called for a central guard tower that could see into the entire complex's surrounding cells.<sup>7</sup> The glass tower in Bentham's prison is the prototype of "Big Brother" with an authority figure that can see out and prisoners who cannot see in, therefore never knowing if and when they

3. Taken from a call by an anonymous character in Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's script for *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With*

4. Zamyatin, *We*, p. 19.

5. For a more in-depth discussion of Eisenstein's relationship to architecture and the plot of *The Glass House*, see Oksana Bulgakowa's "Eisenstein, the Glass House and The Spherical Book: From the Comedy of the Eye to a Drama of Enlightenment" in *Rouge*, 2005 <http://www.rouge.com.au/7/eisenstein.html>

6. A very public dispute between Mies and the owner of the house, Edith Farnsworth, led to lawsuits over the cost of the house, as well as problems with a leaking roof and excessive condensation of the glass walls.

7. Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. and introduced by Miran Bozovic (London; New York: Verso, 1995).

are being watched. As philosopher Michel Foucault stated: “visibility is a trap” which conditions people into good behavior.<sup>8</sup> The glass house echoes this, its transparency serving as a false wall, or camouflage, which fools its occupants into thinking they can see through it instead of making evident that they are actually trapped inside.

Manglano-Ovalle heightens this sense of anxiety in *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With*. Upon entering MASS MoCA’s Building 5 the viewer is presented with a glass house sitting at the far end of the massive exhibition space, its white steel columns seemingly melting into the gallery around it. As you walk down the stairs, the house begins to shift in scale until it rises up in front of you, appearing to hover off the floor. Before you know it, gravity takes hold and then immediately begins to slip, creating a wave of disequilibrium. It is clear that something is amiss, that this 25×25-foot version of Mies’s *House with Four Columns* is upside down; its furniture, kitchen, cabinets, etc., all hanging from the ceiling. Gravity is, mostly, held at bay; only a coffee cup shattered on the ground with its spilled contents betrays this force. It is unclear as to what has happened or what more there is to come, but the house’s eerie stillness lets you know that you will not witness any event. The occupant of the house is absent, though his phone rings incessantly as caller after caller leaves urgent video messages displayed on the phone’s screen. One caller chastises the missing protagonist, saying: “I can see you now. I can see you banging your head on that glass wall you believe separates you from everyone else. That glass cube of yours that you hide in. Well I can see you, and don’t be surprised if everyone else can see you. What they can’t see is what I can see, that you continue to bang your head on the glass. If attention’s what you want, hiding out in the

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1995), p. 200.

open isn’t going to help you...” while another call ends with “...there’s no time for waiting, what has to happen will have to happen now.”<sup>9</sup>

Though Manglano-Ovalle never reveals the particulars of the event, he does give us an ending of sorts in his 2006 film *Always After (The Glass House)*, which is on view in the gallery just beyond the main exhibition space. The film depicts the site of a post-event, shot from a floor-level perspective. It is clear that the building in which the film is set has had its windows broken, but all the viewer sees is a broom slowly and endlessly sweeping up glass debris. The sound is minimal, just an echoing of breaking glass adding to the hypnotic rhythm of the material being pushed along the floor. On occasion you catch a glimpse of the legs of some anonymous occupants leaving the building, hinting at the presence of witnesses or accomplices. In refusing to depict the event, Manglano-Ovalle makes you palpably aware that you have arrived too late, or “always after.” Not so incidentally, filming of *Always After* took place at Crown Hall, Mies’s 1950 school of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology campus in Chicago. The ceremonial dedication of the building’s renovation in 2005 was attended

9. Taken from calls by the characters R-13 and I-330 in Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle’s script for *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With*.

by more than a hundred architects, historians and members of the press, and climaxed with Mies’s grandson breaking windows with a gilded sledgehammer.

In *Always After*, the back story of the actual event is as absent as it is inconsequential. Manglano-Ovalle never tells us what happens next; instead we are left in a state of incompleteness. Just as Modernism itself is an unfinished project, so is the plot of *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With*, but both ply us with twists and turns along the way. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the power that drives this machine of gravity is, in fact, failure. Mies’s *House with Four Columns* was never built, Eisenstein’s film *The Glass House* was never made, Zamyatin’s D-503 never completes the revolution, and Manglano-Ovalle’s *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With* becomes yet another site of anticipation. The windows will be broken; the next revolution will start again, and for one moment, transparency, just like the utopias of Modernism, will tumble. But we are always left to wonder if the gesture is complete, if it will ever be complete. Manglano-Ovalle keeps us in a liminal zone between the event and its end, in a state of expectation, yet simultaneously he never allows us to be in the moment.

This constant and futile struggle to find an end, to maintain a course of logic, is most evident in a

key passage of Zamyatin’s book where D-503 and I-330 argue that:

“This is pointless! This is ridiculous! Isn’t it clear to you yet: you are starting what is called — a revolution!”

“Yes, a revolution! Why is it ridiculous?”

“Ridiculous — because revolutions aren’t possible. Because our — I am talking, not you — our revolution was the last. And there cannot be any more revolutions... Everyone knows that...”

A mocking sharp triangle of eyebrows: “My sweet, you are a mathematician. More than that, you are a philosopher of mathematics. So then, tell me: what is the final number?”

“What is that? I... I don’t understand: which final number?”

“Well — the last, the highest, the biggest...”

“But I-330 — that is ridiculous, the number of numbers is infinite, which final one do you want?”

“Well, which final revolution do you want then? There isn’t a final one, revolutions are infinite...”<sup>10</sup>

*Gravity* is still a force to be reckoned with; another house will be built, another film made, a revolution started, so it becomes a mobius strip of continual motion — it becomes infinity. ■

10. Zamyatin, *We*, p. 153.



PHOTOS: Kevin Kennefick (left), Art Evans (right)

# MASS MoCA

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## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:

*Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With*, 2009. Mixed media.  
Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

Video Production: Actors — Chaon Cross, Allen Gillmore and J. Anonymous; Casting and Direction — Jim Lasko; Voiceover — Barbara Holbert; Camera — Steve Zieverink; Sound — Paul Dickinson; Digital Effects — Jesse McLean; Video Phone Engineering — InSitu Studio; Editor — Mike Schuh; Screenplay — Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. Based on the novel *We* by Yvgeny Zamyatin

*Always After (The Glass House)*, 2006. Super 16mm film digitized to HD video and compressed for Blu-ray Disc. TRT: 9:41. Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

Film Production: Camera — Steve Herrlin; Gaffer Lighting & 2nd Camera — Mark Markley; Camera Assistant / H.S. Camera — Robert Sanchez; Film Transfer — Ken Wald; Sound — Paul Dickinson / Aneka Herre / Jeremy Boyle; Colorist — Mike Matussek; Editor — Aneka Herre

*Character Sketch for Seductress (from Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With)*, 2009. Graphite on paper. The Hall Collection

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The artist would like to thank Bill Baker, Alessandro Beghini and David Horos of Skidmore Owings and Merrill Chicago, Barry Heheman of Vector Custom Fabrication, Jim Lasko, Larry Smallwood, Barbara Holbert and Red Moon Theater, Brittany Bishop, Meredith Boggia, Maggie Church, Noelle Harper, Kacey Light, Calley Morrison, Rebecca Rice, Will Schwaller, Cortney Tunis, Emily Waenink, and Paulette Wein. Special thanks to Michael Krichman, Carmen Cuenca, and Phyllis Lambert.

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Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle (b. 1961, Madrid, Spain) received a B.A. from Williams College in Williamstown, MA, and an M.F.A. from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. His noted film trilogy *Le Baiser/The Kiss* (1999), *Climate* (2000), and *In Ordinary Time* (2001) focused on the architecture of Mies van der Rohe and the implications of Modernism. Solo exhibitions include: The Art Institute of Chicago; *The Krefeld Suite*, Museum Haus Esters and Haus Lange, Krefend, Germany; El Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey and Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City; Barcelona Pavilion, Fundación Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona, Spain; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, among others. Group exhibitions include: *Bienal de São Paulo*, São Paulo, Brazil; InSITE, San Diego; *Tempo*, Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Moving Pictures*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York and Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain; *The Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Liverpool Biennial*, Liverpool, England, and *Documenta 12*, Kassel, Germany. He has received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, the Media Arts Award from the Wexner Center for the Arts, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. Manglano-Ovalle lives in Chicago where he is a professor at the School of Architecture and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago. He is represented by Max Protetch Gallery, New York; Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid; Donald Young, Chicago; and Thomas Schulte, Berlin.

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*Juggernaut*, a video by Manglano-Ovalle, is on view at the Williams College Museum of Art until May 14, 2010.

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Curated by Denise Markonish.

*Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle: Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With* is on view at MASS MoCA from December 12, 2009 through October 31, 2010.

COVER PHOTO: Kevin Kennefick