

Anyone

The House That Made Mies

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Rem Koolhaas: The House That Made Mies

My mother's friend's grandmother took a liking to her and always offered her tea and razor-thin sandwiches even though she was not her granddaughter. A very small woman with an immense fortune, she was feared by the girls who would run wild stealing peaches on her vast estate, and then visit Grandma out of breath, sweaty, temporarily well behaved.

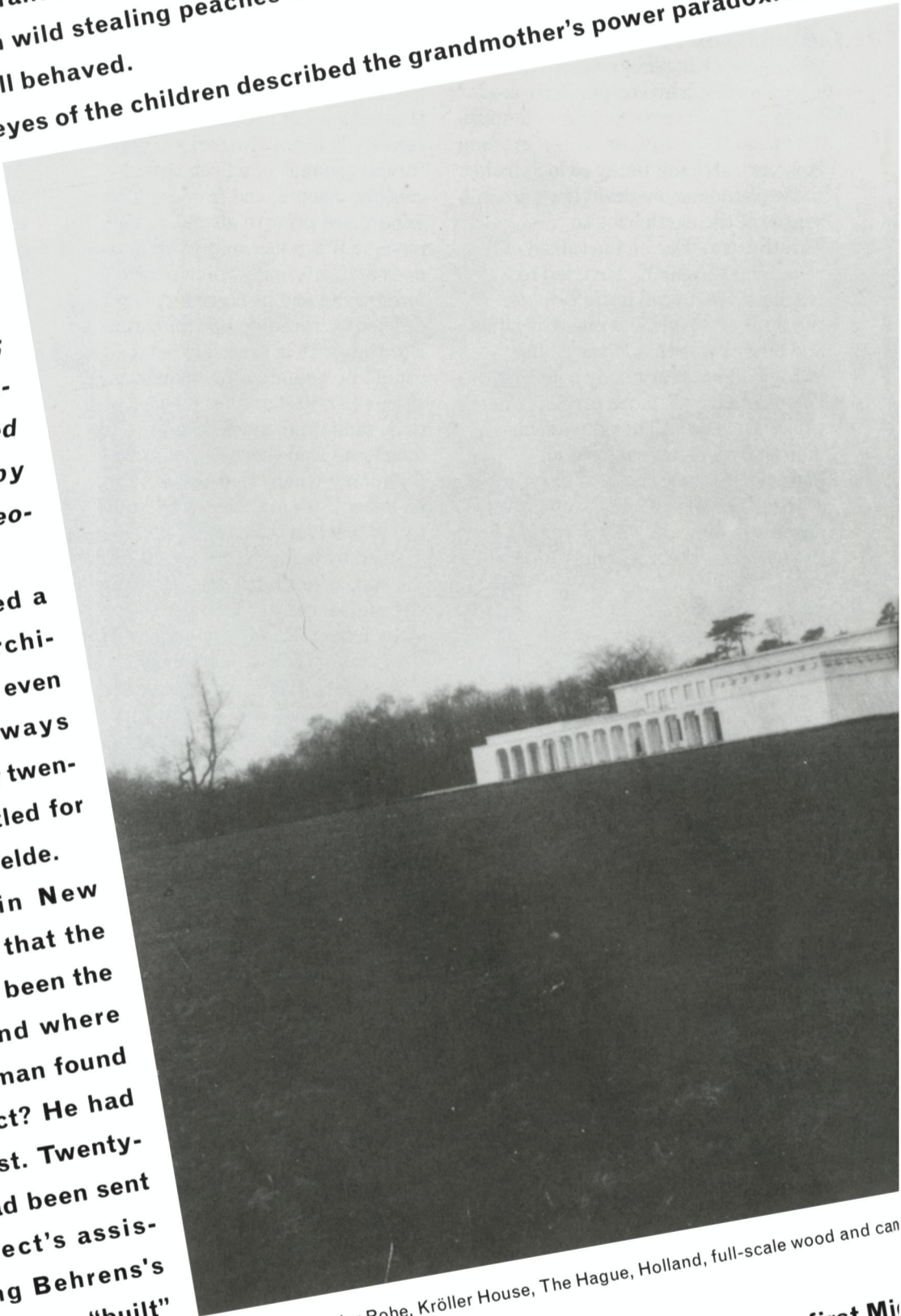
There was one story which in the eyes of the children described the grandmother's power paradoxically more eloquently than the van Goghs and Mondrians that hung everywhere on the walls.

Once she had asked an architect to design a house for her; she had built his project in canvas as a 1:1 model, then decided against it because a nearby train came too close to the theoretical house.

Apparently, she had asked a whole sequence of other architects — among them maybe even my grandfather — but always rejected their designs. After twenty years of trying, she settled for a house by Henry van de Velde.

It was years later, in New York, that I understood that the (un)lucky architect had been the "young" Mies. How and where had this rich older woman found such a young architect? He had not even been the first. Twenty-six at the time, he had been sent as a famous architect's assistant. After rejecting Behrens's proposal — it too had been "built" — she had asked Mies to do her house instead (*The Fountainhead* meets *Lady Chatterly*?). The catalogue that Philip Johnson produced for MoMA's first Mies

I was now old enough to imagine the situation: Mies's first experience of that painful trinity of the architect's career: *elation*: such an important commission; *suspense*: would she like (Was it part of Mies's strategy to convince, or evidence of her skepticism?); *disappointment*:



Mies van der Rohe, Kröller House, The Hague, Holland, full-scale wood and canvas

The picture looked bizarre — as if a graft between two realities had not “taken.” (Maybe it simply revealed the unreality of any architectural enterprise.) Near the entrance stood a man. Was it Mies? I suddenly saw him *inside* the colossal volume, a cubic tent vastly lighter and more suggestive than the somber and classical architecture it attempted to embody. I guessed — almost with envy — that this strange “enactment” of a future house must have drastically changed him: were its whiteness and weight-

lessness an overwhelming revelation of everything he did not yet believe in? An epiphany of anti-matter? Was this canvas cathedral an acute flash-forward to another architecture?

Then, coming out of nowhere, the ghastly surprise of the train erasing the mirage.

Maybe this fiasco triggered the Mies who, from that moment on, would meticulously dismantle the traces and gravities that still clung to him from the nineteenth century and invent the tectonics of disappearance, dissolution, floating, which made him history.

Did the canvas house lead to the curtain wall? All of Mies's later work uses silk, velvet, and leather as flexible counter architectures. His most important love affair would be with Lily Reich, specialist in soft textures....

My mother ran over the ground where, sixteen years earlier, hovered the house that Mies did not make; was it the house that made Mies?

What was weird was that when I asked Philip Johnson about the incident last year, he said he had invented it. According to him, it had never happened. The photograph of the phantom house was a fake, he suggested. But who faked here? Whose fata morgana was this anyway?

Excerpt from *S, M, L, XL* by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, to be published this fall.

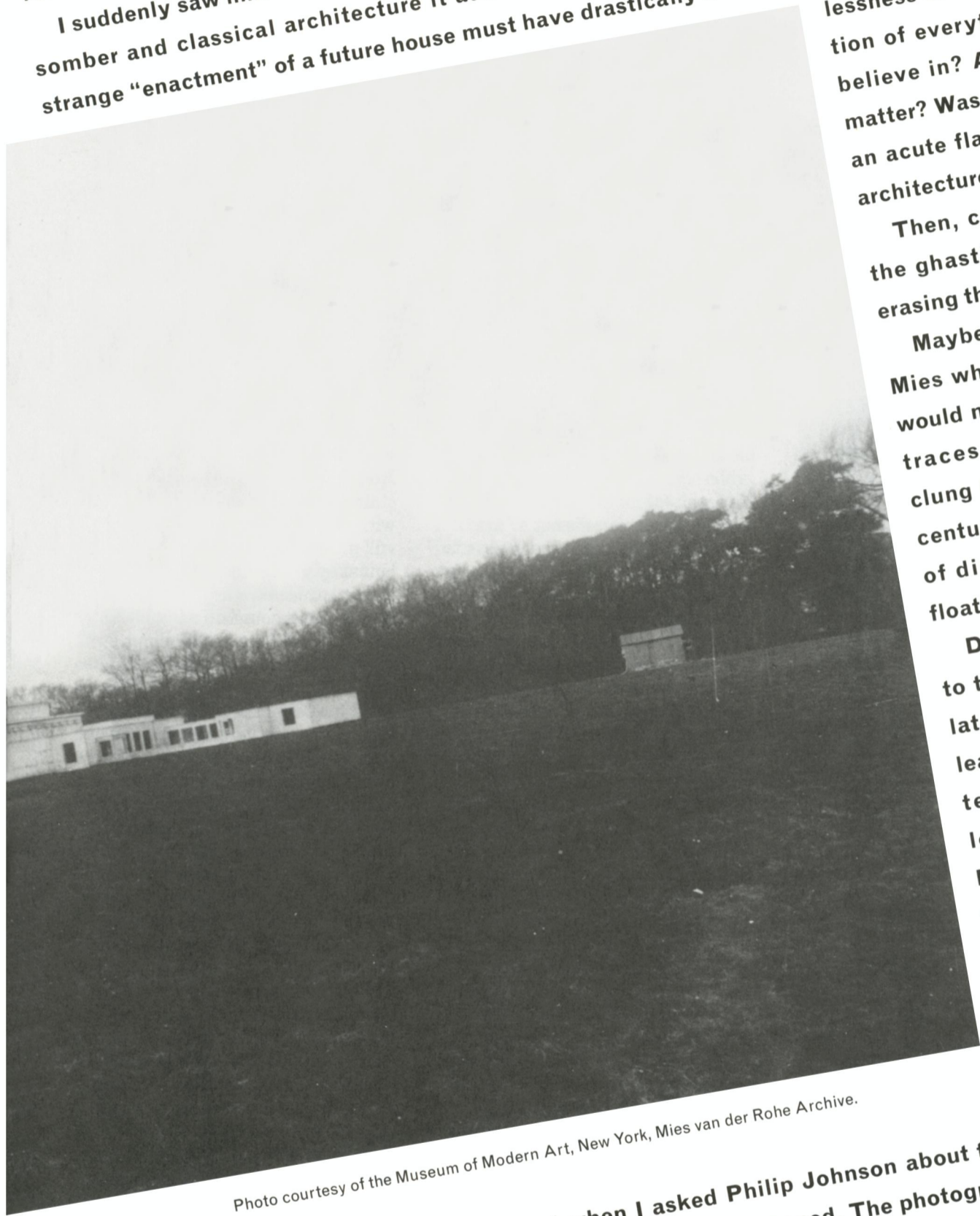


Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mies van der Rohe Archive.

as model, 1912.

s exhibition
rain.
y at the core
e the model?
no house.