

Broken Home

Curated by Meg O'Rourke and Caroline Schneider

May 3 - June 7, 1997

Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

**Absalon - Vito Acconci - Richard Artschwager - Julie Becker - Mark Bennett
Thomas Demand - Isa Genzken - Rober Gober - Felix Gonzales-Torres
Dan Graham - Peter Land - Gordon Matta-Clark - Nils Norman - Glen Seator
Franz West - Jane and Louise Wilson**

I bumped into an object in my apartment one morning, only to discover it was a TV that I had now accidentally turned on, and which showed the remainder of an interview with a haggard woman whose house had been wrecked by flooding. "This was my home," she cried, "Your home is the only place you feel safe in." Her complaint underscored the bond between home and identity, and the precariousness of that relationship because of its dependence on architectural support. The physical dwelling which arises out of a basic need for shelter ends up legislating the network of rules separating man from beast, the rituals of sex from those of birth and death; architecture sections off the eating in the kitchen from the hygienic ablutions of the bathroom, it dictates the divisions of labor, the laws of kinship, inheritance, and lineage.¹ In the blueprint of the house we see "physical nature [itself] . . . masticated and driven through the cognitive meshes to satisfy social demands for clarity which compete with logical demands for consistency."²

And while this consistency ideally yields the security that infants need and most of us crave, the very support intended to uphold these demands functions simultaneously as a repressive apparatus. "Considered from the outside . . . the house that remains a home keeps silent."³ To protect is also to hide, as Freud demonstrated so doggedly in his essay on the uncanny. *Heimlich*, or homely, which at one point in its linguistic history meant only "intimate . . . arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house,"⁴ succumbed to an acrobatic spasm and came to also mean something eerie and concealed. Pivoting on this hinge of repression, the cozy, nestled hearth turns isolated and strange, and uncanny, then, is revealed to be something familiar, once repressed, now come to light.

Certainly a feeling of uncanniness arises when the whole project of housing and civilizing the self is manipulated by the artist in order to release information formerly supported/repressed by architectural frames. When sets of rooms or houses are built and submitted to mechanical reproduction, the mind works rapidly to construct a narrative around the overlapping frames of the *déjà vu*. Barthes's "copy of a copy" becomes the new form of reality, appealing to memory's constant state of renovation, yet the effect is one of estrangement, not familiarity, so that we can view the home from the outside.⁵

Architecture proposes to clarify but also conceals information about power and its relation to property, maintenance, zoning, and moral agendas.⁶ When Gordon Matta-Clark began cutting into the sides of buildings earmarked for demolition, he intended to "open a state of enclosure which had been preconditioned not only by physical necessity but by the industry that proliferates suburban and urban boxes as a pretext for ensuring a passive, isolated consumer."⁷ The uniformity of row-houses or suburban condominium complexes imposes itself on the individuality of the citizen, while the "architect-designed house" gives the appearance of being original and thus conveys the illusion that the client has exercised choice. Matta-Clark's cuts, on the other hand, flew in the face of the obsession with renovation and its need to sanitize the past,⁸ and rather opened up a portal onto historical time. As Dan Graham observes, "In the early 18th century deliberately ruined pavilions which served as 'Temples of Contemplation', 'Hermitages' (for homeless monks) and elegiac evocations of ruined classical structures were built in parks. Matta-Clark's work attached itself to the notion of the instant ruin of today: the demolition. Half-remembered, the existence of a Matta-Clark work now takes the form of a photograph or film or drawing in conjunction with the viewer's own memory and knowledge of the city."⁹ Matta-Clark's interventions, and our relics of them, reveal a site's history in the way that cross-sections of trees are used to map out our ontological bearings on a timeline. "You are here," reads the text next to the arrow on the bull's-eyed tree depicted in *Vertigo*, and it comes as no surprise that Matta-Clark used both concentricity and the form of the spiral in his work. For the notion of decay affects our primal feelings about death and stirs up the anxiety attached to the sequential misrecognitions of ourselves, or the fleeting nature of identity which disrupts the permanence of home. Now we are in Graham territory, where voyeurism and the fluidity of public and private resonate vis à vis the use of transparency and reflection.

The critical flavor of these gestures, of taking the lid off the home, can't help but lead to the predication of the ideal, albeit ironic or negated. Absalon's futuristic-looking, but also archetypal, "Cells" suggest a mode for self-sufficiency while diagramming the isolating effects of the dwelling. Unlike the architect or ideologue, Absalon disclaimed the desire to order other people's lives: ". . . The difference between me and someone who wants to change everything is that I change only for the sake of changing and not to make things better. In contrast to the revolutionary, I need no justification for dreaming such change."¹⁰ Yet he had to eschew a positive agenda because of the dilemma that riddles the hybrid of art and architecture: "Failure of the option of living in the residential cells will return them to the stage of the 'proposal'; its success, however, will transfer them to beyond the sphere of artistic concepts."¹¹ If the artwork ever truly succeeded in becoming architecture, then it would declare its failure as art, but in accepting the limitations of the discipline, the model will forever remain a proposal. Hence the need for irony in Nils Norman's utopian plans for communal living, which could never actually be carried out in earnest, whereas Absalon dug his heels into his solitude and his identity as an artist, building around his own body while turning a blind eye to the future.

This circularity -- of the home as origin and utopia (aside from recalling Stanley Kubrick's *2001*) -- wheels out the female body, invoking questions about the domestication of women within buildings by-and-large built by men. On her way to church, the young maiden in Bergman's *Virgin Spring* brags to her sullied sister who has been impregnated with a bastard child, "I'll be married with honor, with a lock, a key, and my very own home." Unfortunately for her, she has left her father behind, and hasn't yet found the male protector required to make her house a safe home. Exposed in the woods, the virgin is preyed upon by bandits who rape and murder her. It is this aspect of the home which makes it so exhilarating to watch the Wilson twins busting through walls, engaging in physical combat, and feeling out the limits of cavernous space with the use of a trampoline - all of which is projected onto the wall in exaggerated dimensions. There is a link between the historic cocooning of women and the dread/longing felt in response to her body, and Freud had his finger on that pulse: "It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning."¹²

We all want to go home again, just as our humble narrator in *A Clockwork Orange* returns, beaten down and bedraggled, to the scene of one of his most memorable crimes, to the HOME where he snipped and raped to the tune of "Singing in the Rain." It is the home's architecture which both effects this proposition and makes it impossible, for in its divisions we see nothing short of birth and death, past and future, all coming together and thus eluding us. The house can neither mend nor arrest the instability of subjectivity, yet it is rife with information about the ways in which we are civilized, and therefore offers the possibility of changing the way we live. Currently, the artworld's interest in this domain is cropping up with renewed vigor, and not surprisingly, at a time when body parts have disappeared from whence they came, and when the artworld feels so nosy about its neighboring disciplines that it is willing to spend thousands of dollars exploring the "medium" of fashion.¹³ The narrative limning the relationship between house and home is richer and meatier than the accents of our sartorial choices (although interestingly enough, fashion describes another basic need extrapolated to rococo, civilizing effects), yet art must return, as it always has, after visiting these adjacent rubrics, to defining the terms of its own production, reception, and purpose; otherwise the bleeding has occurred in error, and the error has been misread.

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.¹⁴

--Meg O'Rourke

NOTES

¹ See P. Bourdieu, "The Berber House," in *Rules & Meanings*, ed., Mary Douglas (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp.98-110.

² Ibid., p.114.

³ Vito Acconci, *Vito Acconci* (Milan: Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Prato, 1991), p. 126.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *Art & Literature*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 14, ed., Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 342.

⁵ "This should be the kind of home that takes you out of the body, so that the person-in-house-in-country can be analyzed from the outside," Acconci, *ibid.*, p.111.

⁶ See Jeffrey Toobin, *Run of his Life* (New York: Random House, 1996), for his analysis of the O.J. Simpson-Nicole Brown divorce, in which Simpson received the house on the "right side" of town and Brown the one beyond the parameters of what was considered fashionable in L.A., and the resonance of this zoning in the outcome of their relationship.

⁷ Gordon Matta-Clark, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Marseille: Musees de Marseille, 1993), p. 379.

⁸ When my apartment house was recently sold, the new landlords immediately set about trying to evacuate the elderly tenants and low rent paying residents such as myself while surreptitiously supplanting new people into newly renovated apartments.

⁹ Dan Graham, "Gordon Matta-Clark," *Gordon Matta-Clark*, *ibid.*, p. 378.

¹⁰ Absalon, *Absalon* (Ivry-sur-Seine: CREDAC, Centre d'art contemporain, 1990).

¹¹ Idit Porat, "Body-Space Habits," *Absalon* (Paris: Association Française d'Action Artistique 1995).

¹² Freud, *ibid.*, p.368.

¹³ Only where there are tombs can there be resurrections - Nietzsche

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), p. 23.

When the sense of the house becomes that of a spatial system of surveillance and classification, to reside in such a house is no longer to be at home. Thus the issue becomes how we can rethink space in a way that displaces the house.

In Jane and Louise Wilsons' video *Normapaths*, conventions of space-use, movement, and gesture are being disrupted; the corridors, staircases, passages and doors are turned into players -- architectural framing devices used as scaffolding props, to suggest an alternative to gridded space. Domestic interiors are being dislocated by intruders, female housebreakers, illegal aliens recalled by the law, returning to cover over some kind of embarrassing deficiency in the space, to shore it up and articulate the very borders it violates. Slippery atopic movements inaugurate the space and continue to covertly restructure it, while their use of tectonic theatrics smashes the traditional disciplining of the cultural artifact woman.

In the absence of any human presence, domestic space is disclosed as a protagonist in Thomas Demand's "stage-play world" or Julie Becker's model environments, which expose and question the experience of the home and the use of its material construction to manufacture a sense of origin and mortared hopes. The cliché *Broken Home* is recast from its role as excluding epitaph and transformed into an instrument of exploration and excavation. These blown-up photos of reconstructed cardboard interiors suggest spaces that are determined by what may take place there, and consequently by what may not.

In Mark Bennett's detailed "blueprints" of sitcom homes, television's institutionalized problems and solutions are submitted to the architectural grid: the suburban family house and the TV model become part of the same myth, home as the place where a fantasized plenitude can be found -- a realm of personal freedom and life-style projections.

When leisure time turns life into stale and isolating boredom, the puzzle, a slightly anachronistic toy, relies upon the reiteration of picturesque, wholesome and idyllic settings to cope with this alienation. Felix Gonzalez-Torres' jig-saw puzzle in a plastic bag, a fragile assemblage depicting a house, questions the comfort of the familiar enclosure with the fissures and cracks latent in the endless re- and disassembling of the puzzle.

Also along the lines of simulation and play, the dollhouse was once a microcosm of a certain social milieu: the bourgeois household. But in Robert Gober's *Burnt House*, the object's educational purpose has been ruined by the evidence of mischievous children -- as if they've been playing with identity and the framing of physical space, threatening the law of the house, the initial organization of their dwelling space, the hearth of the family, the crematorium as the hearth of such hearths -- whose uncanny condition is marked by the cinders, ashes and relics of a toy house; once the children are tamed, however, and the criminal arrested, the residue of the violence remains visible on the surface of the model.

Vito Acconci's *Ladder Lounge Chair*, whether as detumescent lounge chair or erected ladder, confronts the desire for a home with the need to escape the potentially suffocating effects of domestic security. While the ladder lends itself to the building of the house, supporting the myth of the American male, it also turns into a device used to exit the four walls, thus exposing the multi-sided nature of emancipation -- that of domestication and that of escape from the same.

Franz West's furniture pieces and sculptural elements (*Pass-Stücke* or *Adaptives*) stimulate physical spatial exploration as well as mental projections in a scenic environment. These spatial mind wanderings and dwellings might be lubricated by liquor: ludic and bucolic, the beds, chairs, couches, just as much as a liquor bar, invite their user to investigate space at the level of affective, bodily, lived experience, while criticizing the "level of the conceived, where the dissemination of the written word and of knowledge yields the members of society into a 'consensus', and in doing so confers upon them the status of 'subjects'."

As the reign of the facade continues to dominate the public sphere, furniture imposes itself on the sphere of private life by delineating a conventional setting. A proposition of sculpture as "felt space" finds an expression in Richard Artschwager's *Doorhandle*. As a wall-grip, it transforms the wall into a door, becomes a device to breach the wall and open up to the neighbor, exposing the wall for what it is, and revealing the underlying social concerns on which the wall is founded.

Screens and partitions are used for differentiating between male and female spaces in terms of location, access, and comfort, thus contributing to the physical and psychological privatization of sexuality within the marriage, and to the ideal of the family. Isa Genzken's casts of model fragments resist genderization by their very radicality; as concrete sculptures, they problematize bodily inscription into male-dominated sculpture and architectural space. "It is precisely because they deny architectural vision and variation, richly modeled surface effects, and painterly texture" that Genzken's *Halls, Windows, Gates* and *Houses* "enable us to think about architecture at all ... neither melancholic or commemorative, nor utopian and anticipatory," these severe structures are concrete remnants of the utopian model itself.

With Glen Seator's faulty cleaning compound, abrasive substances build up into toxic residue, and the performance of the stain remover becomes a detergent for disrupting the ideals of the sanitized household as domesticated femininity. Renaissance architecture claimed that before it could defend the body, architecture must defend itself against the body, the female body especially -- closet away the abject domain from the spatial representation of pure order.³ Absalon's *Cells, Compartments, Proposals for Habitats*, or *Proposals for Everyday Objects*, interjects bodily inflections (masturbation, nose-picking, dandruff-scratching) into what appears to be a sterile space. While these white-washed habitats have been associated with purity, hygiene and utopian expurgation, their performative nature turns the space into a stage where the human subject is positioned between enclosure and disclosure, between that which both violates the space and is concealed in order to effect the space in a first place. The cells enact the critical slippage between having a place, making a place, taking a place, and taking place -- engagement with place.

A dance step is only a step on the condition that it challenges a certain idea of the locus (lieu) and the place: -- to dance is to displace the house and the regime of placement based upon it. In Peter Land's video, the artist's compulsive, wild, and naked gyrations in the corner of a cell-like room expand his psychological borders, while feeling out the inside of the architectural frames. This heroic stripper hardly unveils an unknown terrain; rather, his auto-erotic stumblings merely express a state-of-being and of dwelling in the world: the subject's relation to place is experienced through a tragic parody of self-humiliation.

How strong is the wall? And can we imagine replacing the room? If the modern room comes into being as a consequence of the invention of the corridor, this innovation, renarrativized, now generates questions about the origins of the nuclear family and the formation of bourgeois subjectivity. Gordon Matta-Clark's intrusions into the seamless urban fabric "reveal private integration of compartmentalized living spaces, showing how each individual family has coped with the imposed structure of his container."⁴ Also, and on a more conceptual level, they "designate spaces that wouldn't be seen and certainly not occupied."⁵ *Reality Properties: Fake Estates*: When Matta-Clark bought fifteen 'micro-parcels' of land in Queens, leftover properties from an architect's drawing, the artist addressed the question of reality as commodity. Found economic and metaphoric voids, these space-relics are turned into loopholes, openings in the very idea of mapped space -- loophole being a hole *en abîme*.

The same will to work with the body of the city, to open the closed facades and to publicly expose the half-private, half-public stories hidden in the city's buildings is shared by Dan Graham. While Tatlin and the constructivist avant-garde believed in an authoritative master-plan and a potential for change and finalization, Dan Graham's model-works operate as critical tools to disrupt public and private codes, parasites in the system rather than prototypes for typological transformations with ideological references. Whether fractional or full scale models, Graham's works lie between utopia and real space to present plausible manifestations of "heterotopia": "other" places with respect to ordinary cultural spaces, and yet connected with all the locations of the city, functioning as "both mythical and real contestation of the space in which we live."

Contrasting Graham's reflection on "cool", minimal architectural style, Nils Norman's intricate models and diagrams put readymade systems for real places on a pedestal -- if you buy the idea, you get the space. Ironically reenacting defunct utopia, these autonomous microsocieties serve as a monument to utopia's slow death. Acceptable as both toy and proposition, the model exhibited as art turns into this hybrid device, oscillating between prop and sign, realism and utopia, politics and art, an instrument for social critique just as much as an experimental laboratory for potential construction sites.

The avant-garde "social condenser"⁶ is to the left what the home is to the right. And as the profound inapplicability of these proposals has been recognized and their ideological expectations criticized, the model-works of the 90s are certainly less heroic and ambitious than their precursors - their interrogation of a "broken home" and fractured "social condenser" merely shows up the fact that, in the face of failure, the ideals of change, innovation, and utopia remain resilient and acute.

---Caroline Schneider

NOTES

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991), p. 224

² Benjamin Buchloh, "Isa Genzken: The Fragment as Model," in *Isa Genzken* (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther Koening, 1992), p. 141

³ "The idealization of architecture, which had found exceptional exponents in Marsilio Ficino and Leon Battista Alberti, collapsed when it came into contact with human feces," Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, trans. Jessica Levine (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p. 69.

⁴ see Jacques Derrida, "Choreographies," in *Diacritics*, 12:2 (1982): 69.

⁵ Alexander Alberro quoting Dan Graham in "Specters of Utopia," *Dan Graham: Models to Projects* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1996), p. 16.

⁶ Gordon Matta-Clark, *Gordon Matta-Clark* (Marseille: Musees de Marseille, 1993), p. 373.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Lotus International*, 48-49, (1985-6): 13.

⁸ In his book *Constructivism* of 1922, Alexei Gan planted the notion that buildings could function as a social catalyst. Constructivist architects later distilled this with the phrase the "social condenser" (i.e. workers' clubs, community kitchens, etc.). See Catherine Cook, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), pp. 89-92.