Domestic Radicality

Daniel Spoerri, *Das Bistro der Heiligen Martha*, 2014

Citing the work of artists including Valeria Anzuate, Abbas Akhavan and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Bob Dickinson discusses the idea of the home as less a haven than a haunted place of loneliness and, in the case of Gregor Schneider, obsession.

Uncertainty rules. Lockdown may seem to be easing as I write this, but waves of further infection continue to threaten former freedoms and constrain future ones for some time to come. So, as long as any hint of lockdown lingers, the surroundings of the home – for those who have them – will continue to loom large. For some, recent conditions have turned life at home into an isolated or tiresomely shared universe; for others, it has become a prison, or worse.

For artists, unable to access studios, teach face-to-face or to exhibit while galleries remain closed, these are especially difficult conditions in which to maintain a practice. But by returning to the immediacy of that which is closest to hand – the home, its objects, and the tasks those objects contain – are collectively illustrative of an issue that deserves renewed attention. In a recent interview with the *Guardian*, philosopher Bruno Latour noted how lockdown enabled reflection, giving 'people powerlessly stuck at home a way of thinking about how they would create a better future'. Questions of how to achieve agency, to 'create a better future' at a time when dramatic change engulfs us, are perhaps found in a return to what Latour calls 'circulatory capacity'. Latour's term refers to how we might reconsider the dynamic networks in which we interact by placing attention upon the ways we linguistically differentiate nature and culture, local and global, humans and non-humans (including animals and objects).

In assigning agency to non-humans as well as humans, Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides a useful way to reconceive the lockdown, which has brought an enclosing of the domestic sphere materially but mediated by technology. These interlinkages are presciently described by Latour in his observations of the experiments that led to the success of Louis Pasteur's research in 19th-century France. He also looked at network failures, such as the scrapping of Aramis, an ambitious alternative transport system for Paris in the 1960s and 1970s (which was itself revived in Manchester eight years ago in the experimental project *M-Blem* by duo HeHe – Profile *AM*370). By the early 2000s, Latour was directing attention towards 'matters of concern' over 'matters of fact', focusing on 'gathering points that affect the whole

Martha Rosler has commented that since the time she recorded the performance, nothing much seems to have changed: 'Women own the domestic sphere but not the public sphere,' she has said. Even more so, now, perhaps, as during the current pandemic crisis our sense of the ordinary has been tested – especially for the vulnerable.

world', such as fake news, climate change and, most recently, the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has come from within humanity, not from outside.

It is possible to identify these 'circulatory capacities' in several contemporary artists' works through the objects and materials they put into play and use. This can be seen in works that reveal the isolated and locked-down conditions of the individual without agency, or critically engage with the occupations, and preoccupations, of those who are domestically trapped or forced to stay home. These works bind together humans and non-humans as networks or what can be termed hybrid networks: subject as well as object, social as well as natural.

The capacity for ordinary objects to acquire agency by assuming performative and narrative power can be found in Daniel Spoerri's works; oddly enough, he did this by preventing their circulatory capacity by trapping his objects. His 'snare-pictures', which he started in the late 1950s and continues to make, contain objects left on tabletops or found in drawers that are preserved in position. Spoerri fixes the resultant accumulation down and exhibits it upright. Thus, the remains of a meal including plates, knives and forks, ashtrays containing cigarette ends and ash, and books the artist happened to be reading at the time, all appear, to often disconcerting effect. In this new upright context, objects undergo a change, becoming sculptural patterns with compositional power, the opposite of the mess most of us are convinced we are making in accumulating clutter or leaving the breakfast dishes uncleared and unwashed.

In 1961, on 17 October at 3.47pm precisely, following a conversation between the artist and his friend and fellow artist Robert Filliou, Spoerri began devising his *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, 1966, based on a map of the 80 objects lying on a table in the room he was sharing with his wife at the Hotel Carcasson in Paris. This developed into a booklet explaining the story behind each numbered object, which Spoerri also cross-referenced and had illustrated by cartoonist Roland Topor. This approach, describing the significance of objects and their associations, endorsed them with capacities of their own. They were not just useful, or simply aesthetically pleasing objects, but they were also revealed and revered as having intimate contact with the humans handling and exchanging them. Eliciting networks of exchange as independent chains of agency, Spoerri questions the place of subjectivity within a field of human and non-human actors.

Nowadays, however, you can easily end up with too many objects, and domestic tasks can become overwhelming. The US-based artist Susan Copich's 2014 photo series, 'Domestic Bliss', for instance, satirises the angst of middle-class suburban life for a dissatisfied mother and desperate homemaker. The overburdened domestic figure at the centre of these images is uncomfortable and at odds with the things around her, while the men and children who also feature do not seem to notice or to care. These humans are, to an extent, at war with the environment around them, which consists of the things their income allows them and privileges them with, but which they do not seem at all at home with. The unhappiness that seems ready to explode in this series, and others by the same artist, is finding expression in the overabundance of objects, in superfluity.

Recent work by the Argentinian artist Valeria Anzuate also approaches this subject of domestic unhappiness and oppression by using everyday objects in an act of food production. Anzuate has spoken about the 'fragilities' that are clearly expressed in performances that bridge nature and body, body and action, body and transformation. 'With the chosen objects, accessories made and the body functioning as a reservoir, I try to explore the sinister side of things,' she says about her work. Her video *What A Heart Can*, 2017, is a good example of this; it shows her rolling a lump of pastry into a large, thin sheet, which she eventually drapes over her face, allowing a hole to emerge over her gaping mouth. The piece works by converting the psychological metaphors of pressure and disintegration into something real, using the simplest material – pastry – in an expanded, extended version of a domestic chore, the artist's hidden and distorted face suggesting possible domestic violence.

The precursors of such critical art can be traced back to early performance-based, black-and-white, single-channel videos by Martha Rosler (Interview *AM*314), most famously, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975. At the opening of this work, which, since the rise of YouTube the artist was surprised to find has become 'an institution', Rosler faces the camera to demonstrate, with deadpan mock-seriousness, the violent use of a lexicon of kitchen implements, beginning with Apron and Bowl, and then, rather more menacingly, Chopper. Fork and Knife are for stabbing. Ladle and Spoon throw their contents away backwards. The final letters of the alphabet are like semaphore signals – U (you), Y (why?) and Z, a giant slash of the knife – the artist finishing with a questioning, shrugging gesture. Rosler has commented that since the time she recorded the performance, nothing much seems to have changed: 'Women own the domestic sphere but not the public sphere,' she has said. Even more so, now, perhaps, as during the current pandemic crisis our sense of the ordinary has been tested – especially for the vulnerable. By using foodstuffs or kitchen implements, it is artists like these who make these objects resonate with new meaning as well as humour.

But if domestic space presents to us its own networks of objects and humans it can also take on disturbing and dominating characteristics (for instance, the influence of the state in the home during lockdown). Another perspective on the home comes from Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila's three-screen video *The House*, 2002, which invites audiences into the middle of an imagined dwelling in which a woman experiences

‘extra voices’ that cause her to block out the windows. The piece was based on interviews with women who have gone through psychosis. What we see on screen are what she is trying to exclude. The artist followed this meditation on mental illness, the house acting literally as a site for projection as well as a refuge, with the 2004 series ‘The House Sculptures’, which resemble architectural models. This series proposes houses as ‘symbols of human consciousness’, including, for example: *Clear House*, with transparent walls but containing visible essentials like staircases and doors that cannot be seen through; *Pool House*, which is flooded with water; *Shade House*, which sits under large square umbrellas protecting it from excessive rain and sun; and *Tent House*, which the viewer can enter by sitting underneath and putting their head into the house while it rotates mechanically around them, the artwork itself becoming a playful object with circulatory capacity. Playing with ideas from art history of ‘perspective’ as a phenomenon that changes according to position, these works form a prism through which the house and its occupant share consciousness.

Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Garden: Fountain*, 2012, installation view Delfina, London

But a home, rather than a house, does not always have such exact, clear-cut borders. When the Iranian-born artist Abbas Akhavan was a child, he lived in a series of cramped homes in Tehran, subsequently causing him to become fascinated by adjacent spaces like backyards and gardens, which seemed to him neither inside nor outside. His *Study for a Garden: Fountain*, 2012, brought working hosepipes indoors to irrigate plant life that seemed to have grown out of the floral pattern on the carpet of a London townhouse, while his *Study for a Curtain*, 2015, interweaves local plants and leaves to construct something that could either serve as a curtain or a floormat. There is a sense in his work of the fragility of home as well as the porousness of walls and borders, in a manner that recalls Walter Benjamin’s writings on Naples. Referring rather more to the vulnerability of the home, Akhaven’s installation *Kids, Cats and 1 Dog*, 2017, which was painted on the roof of a gallery in Dubai so that it could only be seen properly from the air, was a direct response to the appeals for aid that appeared on rooftops during Hurricane Katrina.

These works by Akhavan and Ahtila emphasise the extent to which the home as refuge can also bring isolation and precarity for the humans inside. Less concerned with the tasks that might go on in spaces like these, these artworks let audiences get close, or go inside, but remind them that it is difficult to understand the totality. The house in totality can sometimes become so all-engulfing that it can invite isolation and separation. The German artist Gregor Schneider, for instance, has focused much of his attention on the house he was born in and inherited in 1969, on Unterheydener Strasse in Rheydt, near Monchengladbach. He began turning the whole building into an artwork whose title also contains the initials of its address, as well as the German word for ‘origin’, *Dead House ur*, 1985–, by gradually introducing new spaces into existing rooms and doubling them, and then making other alterations that even allowed some rooms to move. Visitors have reportedly found the experience extremely disconcerting and it is not difficult to understand why. Imagine what it would be like if you suddenly realised that the doorway through which you were about to exit the living room had just opened out into nothingness.

Schneider wrote about his desire to move the house and turn it into a kind of three-storey mobile home, with his parents and other relatives inside, some dead in the cellar, some alive. He began exhibiting rooms from the building, eventually rebuilding the whole house in the German pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale, winning the Golden Lion. If some of its spaces looked unfinished, like *The Last Hole*, 2001, with its breeze block-and-plaster construction and desolate puddle at the bottom, others were no less unsettling, including a lead-lined *Totally Insulated Guest Room*, *Love Nest* and *Puff* (a brothel). Schneider’s rooms have been widely exhibited, including bathrooms, garages and rooms containing what appear to be human bodies, along with other nightmarish spaces, like *German Angst*, 2014, which is filled with mud, bringing to mind David Lynch’s 1977 film *Eraserhead*.

Schneider argues that the real death that occurs in his work is at the moment of exhibition, so by inference his endless destruction and rebuilding processes might be considered the real life. His work raises interesting questions about what it is to ‘live’ in a room, or within a bigger building like a house or tenement. Can you copy a wall, or copy a whole room, within an existing room, take it away, and still retain or duplicate the original room’s sense of presence? Meanwhile, Schneider’s presence in the house remains largely invisible in his work, although in clips from televised interviews we get a sense of how the artist has to squeeze through the cramped spaces and hidden zones of his home, unlocking doors and sliding walls aside. Schneider’s work naturally brings to mind Sigmund Freud’s concept of the *unheimlich* – the unhomely – taking the German word for whatever is understood to be hidden or concealed as well as the opposite of ‘*heimlich*’ – a place of personal safety and ease. Mark Fisher’s linking of Freud’s term to a place that is haunted at the same time as being one’s personal old ‘haunt’ also perfectly captures the complexity of Schneider’s obsessive project. And although everything seems eerily quiet in his work, and the objects inside a room like his *Wunderkammer*, 1989, are seemingly inert and neglected, the house and its rooms all seem to have become Latourian objects with circulatory capacity, whether they move inside the house or migrate to other locations. The artist has made the house stay in one place while potentially being everywhere or anywhere at the same time, constantly being demolished and reassembled by human hands. In interacting with such objects, Schneider, like Anzuate, becomes the explorer of ‘the sinister side of things’.

Bob Dickinson is a writer and PhD researcher based in Manchester.