Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art

By Gill Perry
Reaktion Books, 2013

Art and The Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday

By Imogen Racz
I.B.Tauris, 2015

Reviewed by Anne Swartz

The home in contemporary art has been a subject for many artists as a material image. It also is a gathering point for artistic meditations on how the dwelling encompasses the social situation. In recent years, the home has been examined in the art historical and visual culture literature in edited collections of essays and as a study of a few artists. British curator Colin Painter’s Contemporary Art and the Home (2002) and Anglo-Australian cultural historian Sara Ahmed’s Uprootings/regroundings: questions of home and migration (2003) are essay collections, while art historian Jennifer Johnung’s Replacing Home: From Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art (2012) focuses on case studies, emphasizing art that offers alternatives to the fixity of the home.

Perry’s and Racz’s monographs are welcome additions to the literature and will become essential references. Both consider the literal structure of the home and house and functions like domesticity, and have organized their text into themes, with each chapter functioning independently.

In Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art, Perry frames artists exhibiting in Britain, Europe, and America and their explorations of the representational form of the house or home as an image and a subject in installation art. She interrogates the house and home as either a spatial configuration or representation, utilizing theoretical models ranging from phenomenology to feminism. Although her study centers primarily on American and British artists, she also includes several artists of other nationalities.

Playing at Home is divided into seven chapters, with numerous subheadings to organize the analysis. Perry has brought together artworks in each chapter where she can highlight a theme, such as “Family Traces,” in the first chapter. She then immediately begins surveying a limited number of works by an artist. Usually she considers only one complex piece with numerous components, such as Chinese artist Song Dong’s Waste Not (2012) comprising more than 10,000 objects. In select instances, she will discuss more. In Chapter 3 on “Broken Homes,” she discusses one to three works by seven artists and then extends her appraisal to five works by Korean artist Do-Ho Suh, who has made numerous important works about the home. Chapters open with a consideration of the art and have neither a framing introduction nor a summary conclusion. Nevertheless, with 45 color plates and 75 halftone illustrations, it is an excellent resource for anyone interested in a detailed overview of selected themes about the house and home in contemporary art.

The title phrase “Playing at Home” establishes the general scope of the book, which examines human engagement with houses, including a remarkable variety, from dollhouses to dream houses, even haunted houses. Perry recognizes the enormity of what a house and home can represent in the artistic imagination: “Our relationships with ‘home’ and its material correlate, the house, can reveal complex cultural geographies in which established
categories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, and social status can overlap and interact” (Perry, 10).

Perry explores film and installation art, relying on a specific reading of the latter: “In its three-dimensional forms, installation art has a special potential to stimulate ideas and memories through the embodied experience of material objects” (Perry, 14-15). Such a definition leaves out the non-material and the conceptual but keeps the narrative on track because of this clarity. Chapter headings indicate her attention to types of homes or their forms, for example, Chapter 2, “Sealed Down,” has subsections titled “Size Matters,” “Cottages,” “Toys and Doll’s House,” and “Furnished or Unfurnished.”

For Perry, a professor of art history at the The Open University (UK), this book represents her ongoing interests in gender and visuality, and specifically in play and domesticity. She acknowledges the reach of house and home as interdisciplinary composite themes, incorporating “cultural geography, anthropology, literature, philosophy, architectural history and film studies (among other disciplines)” (Perry, 254). The volume draws upon many areas of inquiry in an accessible manner. As an example, after discussing Anglo-Asian Sutapa Biswas’s film Birdsong (2004; Fig. 1), Perry remarks upon the oft-complicated subject of the home. Biswas’s unusual work, which is a fantastic image of a young boy in an English home interior imagining he has a real horse living in his home (with one of the dual projections on a slight delay to add to the disorienting or hallucinatory quality of this image). The child looks Southeast Asian (he is Biswas’s son who inspired this work saying he wished he had a horse living in his home). The idea of home being a place rife with fantasy and dissociating at the same time mirrors the conventional immigrant experience of dislocation in the new home country. Following the discussion of Biswas’s complex work, Perry sums up her perspective on her subject, writing that “‘Home’ emerges as an elusive, multivalent concept, enriched by re-imaginings, autobiography and performative play” (Perry, 169). Biswas’s work is redolent with these elements and Perry’s concluding sentence helps give the reader access to the film’s broad issues relative to the subject of home.

In Art and The Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday, Imogen Racz spotslights American and British artists or artists of various nationalities who have exhibited in either the United States or Canada. (Her bibliography does not cite Perry’s book, though she does list an article by Perry on another topic.) While she looks at similar theoretical models as Perry did, including phenomenology and feminism, Racz weighs the issues differently and broadens the topics. (As the subtitle indicates, she includes comfort, alienation, and the everyday.) Racz intersperses issues and examples from the distant and recent past; while she principally discusses recent art, she also looks at the origins in early Modernism (or earlier) for the concepts she reviews. Each chapter begins with a history of ideas and art related to the subject at hand, but as with Perry, offers little in the way of a conclusion.

A Senior Lecturer in Art History at Coventry University, Racz has studied contemporary craft and sculpture, and gender, one of her persistent interests, is a theme in this book. She argues for her primary focus on American and British artists because of the existing overlaps in the “real social and cultural understanding of the ideals underpinning the home and family,” and emphasizes the “ways that disturb, challenge and enrich the normal understanding of this phenomenon” (Racz, 4, 5). She centers her inquiry on “sculptural practice,” which is an expanded definition of sculpture, encompassing both objects and their presentation. She explains:

Sculptural practice is of the world, and is experienced spatially, materially and in time. Sculpture is measured against the scale of the body, and the audience needs to move around it to engage with its material reality. Its physicality can act as a metaphor and stand in for other states. Found and manipulated objects hold echoes of their previous existence both in function and material. This does not mean that sculpture, objects and installations are ‘reality’; their staging is also crucial (Racz, 1).

Her inquiry is expansive, including discrete objects (such as a found sculpture by British artist Tony Cragg) and wallpaper. This conceptualization
supports her idea that “[t]he home both contains us and is within us” (Racz, 2). Artistic representations of the home, according to Racz, rely on literalism and prompt a kind of autonomic response in the body as the viewer recalls the real and the subjective contact one has with the house, the home, and the domestic.

In contrast to Perry’s book, Art and the Home probes more specifically into the duality of public and private in houses and homes. Some of the themes Racz discusses are specific to the role of objects and structures in our physical experiences and psychic lives or “the gap between the material and imaginative worlds” (Racz, 93). Her chapter headings belie the elision of this pairing: “Enclosure,” “Doors and Windows,” “Female Space,” “Alienation,” “The Unmade House,” “Withdrawal,” “Objects,” “Sentiment and Memory.”

Both books offer an opportunity for the reader to learn more about Anglo-American artistic interests in the home and house. There is some overlap—for example, both include considerations of similar works by British artist Rachel Whiteread. However, this topic is vast and many artists have used the house and home or their corollaries as subject. Both mention Do-It-Yourself (DIY) trends related to the home, discuss crafts, and feminist spaces that have appeared in contemporary art, and pay some attention to the pejorative reality of the home in many artworks. (Perry has a chapter on “Broken Homes,” and Racz has one titled “Ruins.”) However, the negative home is an incidental topic for both authors, and closer scrutiny of artistic works about domestic violence, dysfunctional homes, the home in exile, and similar houses in transitional or degraded circumstances would be useful. Both include some discussions of women artists. Perry mentions Womanhouse, the 1972 massive temporary installation in Los Angeles, organized by American artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro and their students at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art Project, and Racz has a chapter on it; otherwise, there is limited attention given to feminist space. Perry and Racz both excavate the house and home as a significant microcosm of contemporary culture and fill existing gaps.

Although Playing at Home is better illustrated, with just 18 halftone illustrations, Art and the Home is scholarly but accessible. Both are optimal books for an undergraduate course on the home in contemporary art or for the reader attentive to domesticity in contemporary art.

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The Silence of the Women: Bamana Mud Cloths
By Sarah C. Brett-Smith
5 Continents Editions, 2014
Reviewed by Kate Ezra

Mud cloth, or bogolanfini, is a type of dyed cotton textile with distinctive linear and geometric patterns contrasting deep brown with either white or ochre tones. It was originally made by women, and some men, among the Bamana people of Mali, West Africa. In the form of adapted, modernized, and often mass-produced versions that have become popular as markers of Malian and pan-African identity since the 1970s, mud cloth is now just as likely to be seen in Paris and New York as it is in a rural Malian village. In The Silence of the Women, Sarah Brett-Smith provides an in-depth examination of Bamana mud cloth as it was made and used before these changes in production took place. Fortunately, other authors have documented the recent renaissance in mud cloth, showing it to be a vibrant, dynamic art form that is able to respond to contemporary conditions and absorb new meanings. Since the earlier mud cloths, for example Figure 1 (before 1964), were made primarily by women to use as wrapped garments for everyday and ritual use, this book contributes to our knowledge of African women’s artistry and how their art reflects women’s concerns and experiences.

The book’s title, The Silence of the Women, encapsulates both Brett-Smith’s thesis and the challenges she experienced in her field research, which began in 1976 and continued, off and on, until 1998. She found most Bamana women who made and used the cloths to be reluctant to speak to her about them, disavowing all but the most superficial knowledge of their designs and meaning. According to Brett-Smith, the patriarchal nature of Bamana society forces women to be silent and to hide behind a façade of ignorance, since overtly expressing their ideas would incite the jealousy, resentment, and ill will of others, both male and female, and make them potential targets of poisoning and other occult practices. The designs on mud cloth are similarly “mute”—ambiguous and cryptic—meant to camouflage the ideas they encode. In Brett-Smith’s decoding, these patterns relate primarily to marriage and childbearing, and reveal a woman’s vulnerability in the Bamana marriage system, in which a wife lives far from her own family and surrounded by in-laws, co-wives, and co-wives’ children, all of whom may want to do her harm. Although some of the patterns, such as “Guanjo’s Time” (154), suggest positive ways that women achieve success and well-being in marriage, Brett-Smith is especially interested in those such as “Lizard’s Head” (170-76), that allude to the invisible forces women must protect themselves from harm or to hurt those who threaten them.

Sorcery, occult knowledge, and the power to manipulate supernatural forces are deeply engrained in Bamana society, but so are values such as respect, cooperation, mutual support, and obligations to family and society. The Bamana have terms for these opposing tendencies, fadienyi or “father-childness”...