

## The Road to House Arrest

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The *House Arrest* exhibition is born of a winding narrative surrounding personal curatorial interests and public political events. It includes my ongoing interest in how the domestic is treated in contemporary art and my more recent curiosity about the roles of artists in the Occupy Wall Street movement. I have been interested in how exhibitions and artists approach the domestic for a few years. In 2009, shortly after the first rupture in the U.S. mortgage crisis, I curated an exhibition called *House Project* in Westport. It was comprised of local artists and the art/objects they collect. The two-day exhibition was mounted in an unoccupied mansion. This venture is where I first met Nate Heiges and Alex da Corte who were then MFA students at Yale. They are also included in *House Arrest*. During the three years since the pop up mansion exhibition, I have made mental notes of artists who take the domestic beyond an ironic or formalized approach to interior design – artists who complicate the familiar and create unease via the ordinary objects we incorporate into our houses, offices, and portable abodes such as cars, campers, etc.

Using the domestic in an uneasy way finds its way in and out of art history. Eighteenth Century European still lifes often included dying flowers, rotting fruit and dead birds that indicated the cycle of life among other things. In the early twentieth century, modernists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque fractured the still life in their earliest Cubist paintings, as if one were viewing objects through a kaleidoscope or prism. At about the same time the French, Dada artist Marcel Duchamp brought common objects – a shovel, a urinal (signed), and sugar cubes (made of marble) – into traditional exhibition settings. Most historians concur this was his way of challenging existing art world assumptions about what fine art and exhibitions could be. In *House Arrest*, Taliesin's curated shop extends this questioning of what makes an "ordinary" object worthy of being included in an exhibition. What happens when the act of exhibiting objects is not laden with identifiers from art history, the art market, or art criticism? (See his interview with Bodhi Landa for more on that). In contemporary art, it was largely feminist works from the 1960s and 1970s that harnessed the domestic. This time the critiques were less about the art world and "universal" experiences (aka birth, aging, death) and more about women's relationships to life and politics. With much feminist work from this period, the spaces, objects and roles – largely domestic – that limited women's opportunities became symbolic media (materials) for artistic expressions that articulated frustrations, offered alternatives, and highlighted injustices.

My fascination with domestic unease in contemporary art became coupled with the Occupy Wall Street movement one year ago via events in Zuccotti Park. (See Lisa A. Porter's essay for more on this). I found myself very intrigued and inspired. The spontaneous emergence of the community at Zuccotti Park and the structural examples of larger societal systems being reinvented was very exciting to me. Via Bard College's MFA list, I discovered through emails that a number of artists

associated with my alma mater were becoming involved in OWS. While it was a virtual and voyeuristic experience, reading their emails presented me with a range of discussions that included the movement's philosophical complexities, a Zuccotti Park slumber party (see David Horvitz's *Life. Drawing.* project in *House Arrest*), and up-to-the-minute emails from mobile devices as the park was being dismantled in late February, 2012. These were caring, smart, talented people creating pragmatic and paradigm-shifting strategies to re-imagine how we structure our personal priorities and environments as well as our societal organizations and systems.

Soon, I found the domestic and the protest began to intertwine in my mind. It got me thinking about the mix of private and public and the blurring of the two that became highlighted with Zuccotti Park. This phenomenon was thoughtfully considered in Ariella Azoulay's *ArtForum* article "A Civil State of Emergency," where she notes, "Indeed, the very fact of crowds carrying out in the open activities that usually take place in the intimacy of the home – sleeping, doing the dishes, preparing foods, etc. – radically disrupts the relations between these two spheres." Informed by this, *House Arrest* takes on ideas of public and private in the realm of domestic objects and situations as they float between our homes, workplaces, public spaces, and more. More specifically, it pivots on two essential questions: "How do domestic objects impact and reflect our feelings about home, shared public spaces, and temporary sites such as those of recent protests?" "Does changing the context of an ordinary object bring new meanings that can include critique, alternative value systems, and even revolt?" Perspectives range from the nuclear family to bodies of government. With *House Arrest*, the practical and the poetic, the private and the public, the familiar and the disquieting intersect through a variety of juxtapositions that include everyday domestic objects like curtains and toys, common materials such as sidewalk concrete, and glimpses into familiar activities such as the family road trip or alternative living situations like off-the-grid train hoppers who crisscross the United States via rail.

With an exhibition that posits alternative perspectives on the social structures we create – ranging from our own homes to our libraries, governments, and political protests – its important to not jump to any conclusions or posit a single theory. In artist Andrea Fraser's essay for the Whitney Biennial catalog, she discusses art's unique position as an enterprise that at once critiques and willingly participates in the very economic and cultural structures it resists. Fraser writes:

From this perspective it would seem that the apparent contradictions between the critical and political claims of art and its economic conditions are not contradictions at all but rather attest to the vitality of the art world as a site of critique and contestation, as these practices develop in scope and complexity to confront the challenges of globalization, neoliberalism, post-Fordism, new regimes of spectacle, the debt crisis, right-wing populism, and now historic levels of inequality.

If Andrea Fraser is correct, the artists and curators (of show, shop and publications) involved in this exhibition are inevitably connected to the money and social power associated with the art world, yet actively resist its control and authority by using strategies such as humble, everyday materials, ephemerality, and critique to make their art. *House Arrest* is in a not-for-profit art space not in the world, some of the objects it exhibits are borrowed from commercial galleries, and private donors fund the show. Much like the people in Sean Hemmerle's photo of Zuccotti Park, there is a tension in the mix of a political community and individuality in *House Arrest*. Perhaps an effective shorthand description of the exhibition is that while *House Arrest* cannot escape being "in it," the exhibition features a variety of works that resist being "of it." If Fraser is correct, *House Arrest's* organizers and participants cannot exist in a utopic vacuum, but art and exhibition are specially positioned to provide unique perspectives of existing systems while also proposing new, imagined approaches to exchanges in our individual and shared environments.