## **ARTFORUM**

Sometimes I wish I could just phone home.

Recently a friend of mine couldn't enjoy an evening out until she had called her five-year-old daughter. Another said that she understood completely: she sometimes longs to call up her cat. And I often wish that I could telephone my loft. In fact, my answering machine's remote features a room monitor. But would listening to the silence of my four walls satisfy my desire for their enclosure?

Hewing for a moment to traditional dichotomies, house has represented culture, the father, the building, the body public and political, the future, and modernity; home has stood for nature, the mother, the cave/womb, the body private and psychological, the past, and atavism. Home doesn't depend on a house. Those we call the homeless may not have a structured domicile of their own, but many attempt to recreate home: last Thanksgiving, some homeless men living in makeshift shacks under New York's West Side Highway roasted a turkey in a file cabinet and had some friends over for supper.

the door takes up a disproportionate amount of the facade, like a doghouse. Joel Shapiro's little bronze houses on the prairie of the Paula Cooper Gallery's floor posit the artist both as the adult with a bird's-eye view of the chidhood he has literally outgrown, and as the child playing with toy representations. Cabrita Reis' reprise of Shapiro's motif, small iron-and-fiberglass structures surrounded by cypress trees, walls, and chairs, is pervaded by a retrograde melancholia.

The word "home" may itself conjure up a sentimental Victorian image of coziness and comfort, slippers by the fire, teakettles humming on the stove. However, much late-20th-century art presents a more dystopic vision, one I will trace in a brief tour through art, rooms, houses, and household objects of the past two decades, bringing along my middle-class background and my identity as a New Yorker. The concept of home is inevitably personal, even if the "home" of this essay is an agora of the international art world, *Artforum*.

Mira Schor

cramped situations. Says Acconci, "This should be the kind of home that makes you a stranger inside it."

Once entered, this ideograph of house readily becomes a prison. Lee Jaffe's series of "Cages for John Cage," 1990, are lead and steel walled with metalfenced interiors. Repetitive sounds of laughing, crying, and sighing, and a bare light fixture overhead, propose the home as Riker's Island. Bruce Nauman's Room with My Soul Left Out/Room that Does Not Care, 1984, is even bleaker, an interior without interiority, without even a substantial floor: metal-grate floors again recall the penitentiary. Other works by Nauman present the home as a chamber for surveillance: you walk down Live Taped Video Corridor. 1970, toward the monitor but away from the camera, so that you are always viewed but frustrated in any attempt to see yourself. In this home the child is watched but never allowed to develop a sense of self free of the need for an outer mirror.

Such a state of surveillance is a factory for the production of narcissism. And mirrors are frequent ap-

## You can't leave home without it

Home is also homeland, homeboy, homegirl; it is a mother tongue, the basis of an individual's identity in a sense of origin and of place; home is where you come from, where your emotional nature is structured and protected, where you are best known and most anonymous. As in baseball, once you leave it, the object of the game is to get home safely.

"A house is not a home," but to seek home in recent artworks, one first has to get past and inside the pictographic image of house that almost all of us drew as children. Perhaps we were indoctrinated to draw it by Dick and Jane books regardless of our actual circumstances. In any case, the little house, the square with a triangular roof, perhaps a few windows, a chimney, and a front door remains as ubiquitous in adult representation as in children's drawings. In contrast to the urban arena so central to 19th-century art, post-Modernity emerges from the decentered isolation of suburban sprawl. Hello Levittown, good-bye Paree.

This pictographic house is always miniaturized and infantilized. Even when it is big enough for a person to stand up in, it is still the type of structure wherein

The relationship between the house, the home, and the body, acted out in miniaturized environments, is evident in many of Vito Acconci's pieces dealing with private and public space. In early works such as Trappings, 1971, and Seedbed, 1972, Acconci retreated within claustrophobic "location[s] for regressive activity."2 The home was cast as a hothouse of sexuality, and, implicitly, of sexual or gender dysfunction. Acconci calls attention to the sexual aspects of such childhood games as "playing house," which often means acting out gender roles ("You be the mommy and I'll be the daddy"), or playing doctor; tree houses (gender bonding); houses created by a sheet drawn over a table (recreating the womb). His recent, more elaborate playhouses, such as Houses Up the Wall or Making Shelter (House of Used Parts), both 1985, reflect the "cold, manipulative order of the '80s." The spectator is no longer a voyeur, but associative mental imaginings are cut off because interaction is organized into limited patterns: one is invited into a home, yes, then told to sit here, fit in here, squat here. The guest must conform to predetermined and

pointments of the art home, reflecting only the glassy, gleaming surface of their own appearance rather than the child's. Roy Lichtenstein's mirrors of the late '60s and early '70s are impeccably self-absorbed; they are the fairest of them all. Similarly, Barbara Bloom has photographed elegant 19th-century mirrors that do not capture the image of the vampire artist – undead or unalive. "Une Mère de Glace," the title of an essay by the French psychoanalytic theorist Luce Irigaray, seems relevant to this blank reflector: mother of mirror, mother of ice (sea of mirrors, sea of ice).5 The home is the site where the mother takes revenge on her children for having herself been the object of specularization, by denying them an accurate reflection of their own subjectivity. And, in fact, much contemporary work that circulates around the concept of home conjures up an unloving or lacking mother, if one associates the basic security of home with child psychologist D. M. Winnicott's idea of the "goodenough" relation to the mother in early childhood.

In Richard Artschwager's house luxurious furnishings cannot ensure the stability of home: walls shim-

mer and vanish into the Celotex swirls of his many domestic interiors. In *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*, 1989, Robert Goberuses wallpaper, a debased pictorial mode, to suggest a societal nightmare: a sleeping white man (the image taken from an ad for a white sale) dreams a lynched black man. Since the image is ambiguous—whose nightmare is this?—Gober's walls are doubly destabilizing. In another 1989 installation, sink drains in the walls seem ready to absorb the nocturnal emissions of the penises, vaginas, and assholes sketched on the black wallpaper behind them.

Notwithstanding these rather literal imagings of "lack," there's a lot of furniture in the home. The 19th-century urban *flâneur* has been replaced by the couch potato, but this ever-more-passive spectator is denied a soft couch for analytic introspection. Chairs made of lava, granite, and Formica (Scott Burton and Artschwager) are resolutely unadapted to the human form and are guaranteed to hurt actual bodies.

"Go to bed now." At home one learns how to fall asleep. But Gober's *Pitched Crib*, 1987, hints at parents reading Doctor Caligari instead of Doctor Spock. Other cribs by Gober are sterile cages that deny visual stimulation, that pen one in. Rona Pondick's *Lead Bed*, 1987–88, will protect the sleeper's sexual organs from radiation, but infantile sexuality has laid a turd on the pillow. Milk- and blood-filled baby bottles prevent relaxation on her *Double Bed*, 1989, which recalls the Darwinian urge to reproduce and the contingency of the female body, but whose surface would bruise a lover's skin. Want to have sex on a bed? Curtis Mitchell's is covered with so many condoms you'd either be intimidated into impotence or slide off the rubberized surface.



Beverly Buchanan, The Fence and 4 Shacks, 1991, oil and pastel on paper, 38 x 60".

This home tour may appear random but no matter which other invitations would have been accepted, all corridors lead to the rec room<sup>6</sup> of the suburban home, as inevitably as the traffic patterns of the Museum of Modern Art dictate our passage through the history of Modernism. Pruitt • Early live in Saturday Night Live's "Wayne's World," the basement where mother cannot descend; lots of beer cans there, with decal labels: "Shit," "Alien Sex Fiend," "Choose Death," and "Doctor Pecker" (Sculpture for Teenage Boys [Pabst Pyramid 13 High], early 1990s).

There are lots of shiny metal objects in the rec

room: walkers, handcuffs, and more beer cans, Cady Noland's "skeletal tracings of cages, 'playpens' far more openly vicious than Gober's." Critics feel that she "evokes the homespun violence of the hearth." It is said that her "focus may seem circumscribed in its preoccupation with a depiction of American pathology. But hers is no small task. She wants to show the tension between the standard way of looking at America and the reality of our banal lives."

But frankly, this view of the American home and homeland as a bland, barren, generic factory for the production and dissemination of psychopathology is by now the "standard way of looking at America." Such a tarnished picture has long since replaced the earlier American myth of the innocent struggle for opportunity promulgated by Hollywood movies of the '30s. A recent film, Edward Scissorhands, 1990, offers, on the one hand, the bland pastel suburban home as the domain of either ineffectual or brutal men and, for the most part, voracious witchlike females, and, on the other hand, the Gothic castle where a lonely and alienated artist recreates in ice (a suitably post-Modern material, nontraditional and cold) the inhabitants of the suburban "wonderland" who have rejected him.

Edward's ice sculptures remain in the castle, but the "homey" objects described here are ultimately destined for art's home away from home, the "white cube" of the Modernist and post-Modernist gallery, that 20th-century construct from which all Victorian concepts

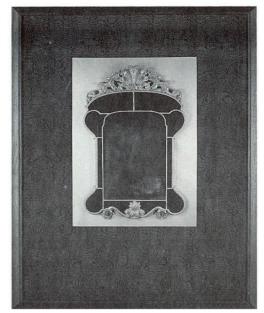


Vito Acconci, Bad Dream House #2, 1988, aluminum, Plexiglas, industrial tile, speakers, mirror, TVs, and lights, 9 x 10 x 18'.

of home have been scoured. Even Gordon Matta-Clark's site-specific dissections of homes, so evocative in photographs, ended up safely ensconced in the white cube. Art itself is being produced in homes that have been made to look like the white cube. The art will be sold to another home that probably also has been made to look like one. Today it is hard for an artist to be taken seriously if his or her studio does not mimic gallery conditions: white walls free of homey elements, and halogen lights please. While it stands to reason that studios that are not prototypically "cubic" might produce work that strays from the given, as John Perreault has noted, "Most [artists] have interiorized the likely conditions and allow these to determine how they work."

If the white cube "hothoused the serial jettisoning of content,"10 Womanhouse, 1972, a project of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of Arts, sought to reinject into art and society the subject matter Virginia Woolf had intuited in A Room of One's Own: "For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force."11 Womanhouse was produced within the confines of a single-family 1920s home in Hollywood and was experienced by the public as a house tour that began in Vicki Hodgetts' painted-foam breast and sunny-side-up-egg-encrusted pink kitchen. The bathrooms included Camille Grey's lacquered, deep red "Lipstick Bathroom" and Judy Chicago's pristinely white "Menstruation Bathroom." Sandy Orgel's linen closet trapped a female manne-





Barbara Bloom, The Reign of Narcissism (Mirror III), 1989, Cibachrome print, 40 × 32". Edition of two. Below: Robert Gober, Drain, 1989, cast pewter, 4½" in diameter. Edition of eight. And Robert Gober, Male and Female Genital Wallpaper, 1989, silk screen on paper. Installation view.

quin between its shelves. A shoe closet by Beth Bachenheimer prototypically contextualized Imelda M. and Mary B., while Miriam Schapiro's "Dollhouse" played with traditional links between woman-and-child/woman-as-child.

Many of the artists who participated in *Womanhouse* were quite young, and their work expressed a sense of their mothers' frustrated domestic imprisonment more than their own personal experience. The confining aspects of the home for its female occupants/caretakers, counterposed to the liberatory aspects of the inner home of the body, were represented and enacted in direct, imaginative, theatrical, and emotive forms, far removed from the dictates of the white cube. The work hardly idealized the notion of home, yet its rooms resonated with a sense of visual *fullness* in full opposition to the prisonlike sensory deprivation given so much credence in the art world today.

Wonderland, 1983, a more recent work by Schapiro, also suggests an imaging of "lack" modulated by the plenitude of feminine activity. Schapiro's celebration of traditional feminine domesticity raises the issue of a double standard in the art world's reading and acceptance of such gendered depictions. One might compare Wonderland to Mike Kelley's wall hanging of colorful afghans and toys, More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid, 1987. Kelley's ironic and strategic use of kitsch gains him a place in "Wayne's World," the currently favored venue of avant-garde art, the latest version of the white cube. Schapiro's genuine embrace of kitsch as an esthetic

consigns her to the unseen world of the Mother, the sewing room in the attic of Modern art. 12 At the center of Wonderland's colorful, active, quiltlike field, Schapiro has placed an embroidered objet trouvé: we are welcomed to the Artschwageresque home of a hauntingly insecure woman who leans tentatively to one side. Schapiro's central placement of this pathetic image is based on sympathy for the sorrows of the disappeared Mother; for its part, Kelley's work threatens to collapse into childishness. One may be ambivalent about the "feminine mystique" but, for Schapiro, this is no excuse for visual impoverishment.

Stuttering God, 1989-90, a recent collaboration by poet Madeline Gins, painter Arakawa, and architect John Knesl, recalls Womanhouse's focus on the interiority of the female body. Part of a larger work, Building Sensoriums (1973–1990) for determining how not to die, it constitutes the "inside" to the "outside" of The Process in Question/Bridge of Reversible Destiny, a 43-foot-long metal-and-wood bridge across the large main room of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. This piece was phallic, metallic, and allowed progress along a linear, although often blocked, path. In contrast, Stuttering God was invisible and soft, a womb entered through two cloth slits in the back gallery wall, a dark birth canal crowding the viewer with net bags filled with sponges. In a sense it was a classic funhouse setup, with all the scary apparatuses visible. Yet the viewer/participator felt genuinely trapped, with only forward movement possible. A walled-off inner core offered peephole glimpses into vistas similar in construction to the piece outside (this was not the nature-bound body secreted in Marcel Duchamp's Etant donnés). Most participants, however, were so anxious to get out that they did not linger long enough to really peep, reemphasizing the gulf between inner and outer space. The work did not seem to rely on the gallery space as home, it almost shunned it.

Ilya Kabakov's radical erasures of the white cube in *Ten Characters*, 1988, and *He Lost His Mind, Undressed, Ran Away Naked*, 1990, emerge out of urban domestic arrangements specific to Soviet Russia. These abandoned but overcrowded rooms are places for narrative, and they continue the tradition of the Russian novel and drama. People lived in these spaces, they talked exhaustively (if only perhaps to themselves) and despaired passionately. Although Kabakov's "domestic theatre" is enacted within a system of Soviet oppression, it has parallels in American culture. Coming to the end of one of his poorly lit, seemingly endless corridor mazes, one could just as easily imagine emerging in the rabbit warrens of the Martinique Hotel

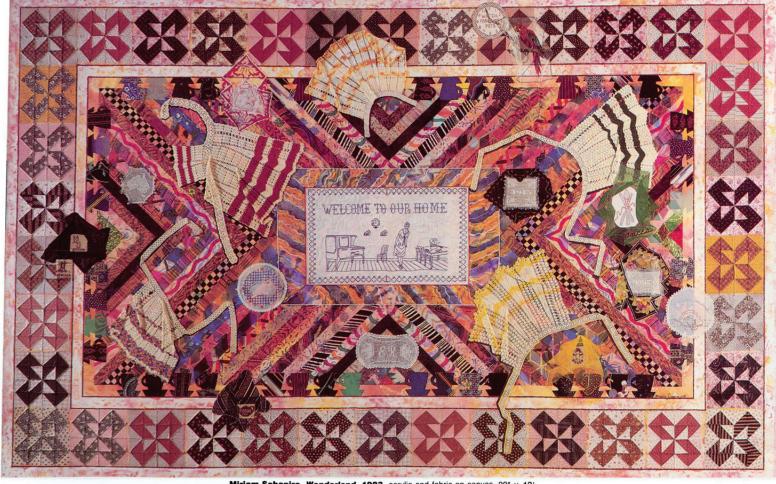
(home for homeless New York welfare recipients) as in the deserted rooms of a Soviet communal apartment. These miserable and often messy homes are nevertheless as replete with human content as the rec rooms of the suburban home are empty.

Urban home life positively spills from the Harlem tenement that is the locus for Faith Ringgold's "Street Story Quilt,"1985. Its windows are a crucial intermediary between the public and the private: people proclaim their antiwar sentiment - "Hell No We Won't Go! Uncle Sam Don't Give A Damn" is scrawled on a torn window shade - or they hang out, observing the ongoing drama of the street, the narrative of daily events displacing the bricks of the building they live in. The story culminates in the perhaps ironic "happy" ending of *The Homecoming*, which envisions the protagonists' removal from this vivid homeland to Hollywood: "Ma Teedy leavin 222 West 146th Street in Harlem today. She goin to live where the grass grows green 12 months out the year. And where the sky is clear blue. And the sun shines everyday. She goin to Beverly Hills in Hollywood where the movie stars live." But this artificial and empty paradise is not figured.

In his contribution to "Bedrooms," a series of installations last winter at Snug Harbor on Staten Island, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt also touched on some of the human content of the inner-city home. A bare, white, old-fashioned hospital bed was the focus of a pink-walled room, barely touched by anything resembling art or even artfulness: on the walls were taped letters and pictures from the life of a Hispanic neighbor who had died of AIDS. The loving support of a lower-class family home could not save its child from drugs and AIDS, despite religious faith and the poetic talents of the victim.

The difficulties of sustaining the concept of home as a secure and intimate place are real. Yet people everywhere-that is, most often women-are trying to "make a home," to infuse a sense of human con-

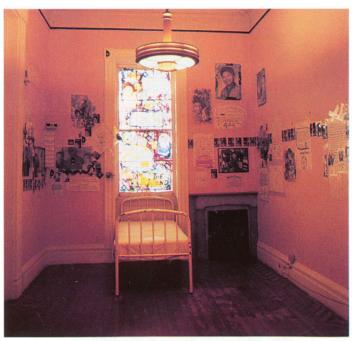
nectedness into a house. In Maureen Connor's Linens, 1980, a starched and ironed white organdy tablecloth spills over and beyond the legs of an elegant diningroom table. The transformation of a useful item into a decorative object, the continuum between woman's work – never done – and the ephemeral visual pleasure it can provide, are addressed without the ironic distance so devoutly adhered to in the contemporary art home. In fact, the piece had a suggestive complementarity to the unusual, noncubic space in which it was displayed. The marble mansion's appointments - linen-covered walls with ornate neoclassical plaster moldings and ceilings - brought to mind the world in which the servant girl, perhaps Irish, who had preserved these luxuries might have lived and worked. One can usefully compare this linen confection to Artschwager's Table with Pink Tablecloth, 1964, where such niceties are frozen into Formica, or to Mitchell's tablecloths, despoiled with coffee and ketchup with a dispassion both scientific and



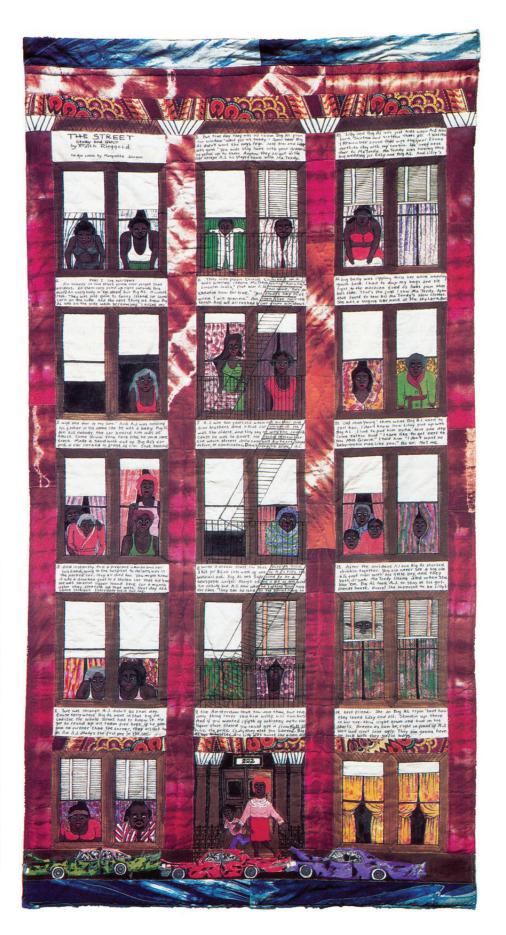
Miriam Schapiro, Wonderland, 1983, acrylic and fabric on canvas, 90" x 12'

esthetically formal. Connor illuminates the momentary triumph of the desire most often enacted by the female, to transcend the imperatives of mere shelter, without erasing a sense of the labor involved in such extravagances. Visual pleasure and exploitation are interwoven.

Contemporary evocations of home, in works by Bloom, Noland, and Pruitt • Early among others, seem based on the reading and misreading of Walter Benjamin, especially his critique of aura and his belief in the radical potential of film and photographic technology. Would these works be different if graduate seminars required texts by Benjamin other than the ubiquitous "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"? Recognition of the intense disagreement over the notion of aura between Benjamin and his friends Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, and Gershom Scholem might complicate one's understanding of Benjamin's feelings. (Brecht wrote in his diary: "b[enjamin] discovered [the decay of aural through the analysis of film, where aura disintegrates because of the reproducibility of artworks. it is all mysticism mysticism, in a posture opposed to mysticism."14) Benjamin's "Unpacking My Library, A Talk About Book Collecting" gives an almost refreshing glimpse of a man, who otherwise seems to have been a consummate schlemiel in practical affairs, outwitting a competitive bidder for a coveted book.15 Shallow readings of "The Work of Art" ignore the



Above: Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Weep Not for Me But for Your Children (Lazarus and the Jibaro: Epos), 1990–91, mixed media. Installation view at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island. Right: Faith Ringgold, The Accident, 1985, fabric and acrylic on canvas. From the series "Street Story Quilt," 1985.



cabalistic aspects of Benjamin's relation to the material world, his understanding of text or object, be it ever so humble, to contain the potential for material and Messianic redemption. <sup>16</sup> Indeed, Benjamin's book collection was of such deep personal importance to him, recalling his Berlin childhood and providing him with a sense of identity and place (even when he and it were displaced to Paris), that some feel he committed suicide because, in fleeing to Spain, he had had to leave it behind. These objects were finally as meaningful to him as his life.

Benjamin's obvious attachment to auratic objects oozes out of his every (au)racular word. A luminous fragment from his essay "One-Way Street" bears upon the implications of aura in representations of home:

as birds seek refuge in the leafy recesses of a tree, feelings escape into the shaded wrinkles, the awkward movements and inconspicuous blemishes of the body we love, where they can lie low in safety. And no passer-by would guess that it is just here, in what is defective and censurable, that the fleeting darts of adoration nestle.<sup>17</sup>

I find particular pleasure in wandering through the deserted backwaters of museums where objects once used in the home are overcrowded in glass vitrines. Most of these objects are pre-Modernist, removed from the Museum of Modern Art's scientifically designed prototypes, and arranged in a manner distinctly unlike Haim Steinbach's ironic tableaux. Gleaming collections of silver teapots, crackled ironstone platters, red and yellow earthenware bowls, porcelain teacups, and majolica dishes recall my hearth, and warm my white-cube-frozen heart.

Looking at the rows of ever-so-slightly dusty chairs and tables hung up for study in the Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I'm not sure that love even rests in the object's flaws. The harder we try to see the beloved, the more fugitive its image becomes; one might as well try to freeze in time the flow of one's own blood. Domestic security rests precisely on being spared, at least briefly, any sense of closure, loss, mortality. You don't see your home unless it is threatened, just as you don't notice your skin unless it is injured. The difference between house and home is evident when a house is emptied of its possessions. The structure remains, but the concept of home has now fled to the moving van; it has gone with the end table that was perhaps never really perceived until it was withdrawn. The empty hallway awaits reinvest-



Rona Pondick, Double Bed, 1989,

mixed media, 9" × 73" × 13' 6"

ment with hominess, but the table contains it, even when it is displayed in a period room or put on a pedestal like an art object. Art objects about home cannot shake their link to the agora, while objects made for use in the home retain the auratic history of their human usage.

Representation takes place in the gap between absence and desire. But that doesn't mean that the desired never existed, was never glimpsed; what is lost may not have been lacking. My mother, for whom English is a fourth language, once wrote to me, "I love you with all my hearth." While such emotion may occasionally be confining, its glow is not imaginary and it illuminates, for me, representation's *effort* to reattain the desired home. The suburbanoid permutations of much contemporary art only focus on absence, and the futility of effort. Why not focus instead on the fullness of what was desire, and the heroism of the effort to slide safely into home?

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 An exhibition catalogue for a show of work by Cabrita Reis is, in fact, entitled Melancolia (New York: Bess Cutler Gallery, 1989).

- Vito Acconci, quoted in Max Kozloff, "Pygmalion Reversed," Artforum XIV no. 3, November 1975, p. 35.
- Kate Linker, "Vito Acconci's Address to the Viewer Or, How Do I Work This Chair?," Vito Acconci: The House and Furnishings as Social Metaphor, exhibition catalogue, Tampa: University of South Florida, USF Art Galleries, 1986, p. 6.
- Acconci, "Home-Bodies (An Introduction to My Work, 1984-85)," ibid., p. 8
   Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, New York: Cornell University Press 1985, pp. 168-79.
- 6. The rec room for recreation can also be read as a wreck room
- 7. Daniela Salvioni, "Cady Noland: The Homespun Violence of the Hearth," Flash

  Art 148, October 1989, p. 129.
- Jeanne Siegel, "The American Trip: Cady Noland's Investigations," Arts 64 no. 4, December 1989, p. 45.
- John Perreault, Bedrooms, exhibition pamphlet, New York: Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, 1991, n.p.
- Brian O'Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986, p. 80.
- Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, 1929, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957, p. 91.
- Although, in another double standard, if a third world artist embraces kitsch and color in a similar manner, it's now considered OK.
- 13. Ilya Kabakov, Ten Characters, exhibition catalogue, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989, p. 35. Kabakov writes about "The Person Who Describes His Life Through Characters": "Most of all, though, the 'albums' are like a type of 'domestic theater,' not contemporary theater where the action takes place in darkness in order to hold more strongly the viewer's attention and envelop him in what is happening on stage, but more like old theatre conducted in a town square in broad daylight where the viewer is free to promenade physically and mentally in evaluating the action."
- 14. Bertolt Brecht, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, "The Adorno-Benjamin Debate: The Issues," The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute, New York: Free Press, 1977, p. 149.
- 15. Significantly, the prize Benjamin won was Balzac's La Peau de chagrin, a novel that links an antiquarian's treasure with desire, fulfillment, suicide, and death.
- 16. For a more complete analysis of the role of cabalistic tradition in Benjamin's thought, see Buck-Morss, "Is This Philosophy?," The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989, pp. 216-52.
- Benjamin, "One-Way Street," Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, trans. Edward Jephcott, New York: Schocken Books, 1986, p. 68.