

HOUSE AND HOME

This chapter will concentrate on the reasons why the concepts of *house* and *home* are important to my research. Though they vary greatly from person to person, these notions are often fundamental to our sense of identity. The significance of gender, personal history, family expectations, social conditioning and genetic inheritance will be examined in relation to this focus on the 'domestic', and explored in terms of my current work. The link between the house and the roles of women within the family depicted in key works by the artists Louise Bourgeois and Robert Adams will be considered, as will the way the notion of the *house* is approached by the artists, German Gregor Schneider and the Australian, Mathieu Gallois.

Whereas a house is a three-dimensional structure in space, a physical place that is temporary and ephemeral, *home* can be better described as a set of beliefs associated with familiarity, comfort and permanence. Home is more intangible and abstract and is connected to memories, dreams and aspirations. Home extends beyond the physical. The house is a place where home might be located.

To find a definition for home that encompasses people's realities without imposing a stereotype is difficult to achieve. An idealised space to which we attach the positive values of love, rest, protection, peace and charity, the home is also inextricably connected with images of the family. The Australian, Allon J. Uhlmann, Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the University of Missouri, writing about the family states,

In Anglo-Celtic Australia, as elsewhere in the Northern and Western European cultural sphere, the 'dominant pattern' of family structure, indeed *The Family*, is a nuclear family that resides in a delineated household, and includes two monogamously intertwined adults---male and female---and their offspring.³

Uhlmann elaborates with a quote from the book *Class in Australia* (1997),

... the middle class in Australia seems to have a persistent drawing power in terms of ethos, image and lifestyle. At its centre is the home, classically a bungalow with its own front garden and backyard in which the middle class lives, dreams, procreates, raises children and enacts a ritual of work/sleep/sex/love/kids/family/death which is at the very heart of the Australian dream.⁴

Realistically, the composition of the family is fluid and changing with no single dominant pattern evident. However, these stereotypical ideals prevail.

³ Allon J. Uhlmann, 'The Dynamics of Stasis: Historical Inertia in the Evolution of the Australian Family', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 16/1 (2005), p.33.

⁴ Craig McGregor, *Class in Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books Australia, 1997) p.141.

Regrettably these ideals obscure from view a dystopian reality that, for some, could include disharmony, abuse and cruelty. Consequently, our own views, occasionally sentimental, are subject to ambiguities and paradox.

The physical structure of the house is the visual symbol for this more romantic ideal. The twentieth century French, philosopher and poet Gaston Bachelard, concentrates on the symbolic meaning inherent in images of intimacy. In his book *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard wrote,

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.⁵

In virtually every culture, gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organise social relations, and symbolise meaningful natural and social events and processes. As a natural consequence of biology, the female partner is often entrusted with the role of homemaker. The homemaker, described simply, is the one who stays at home, rears the children and manages the household affairs. In contemporary western culture these stereotypes are changing, with all manner of arrangements now considered acceptable, as is our understanding of who should be the homemaker but the assumption is that it is still largely a female responsibility. So to be known as the homemaker one is also, in a sense, in charge of creating that more intangible place, home.

Physical and behavioural differences are often discussed in terms of the nature versus nurture debate which compares the importance of a person's innate qualities, as determined by their genes, with the effect of one's personal experience. According to Henry D. Schlinger Jr. an Associate Professor of Psychology at Western New England College in Springfield Massachusetts, skin colour, height and gender are genetic traits, whereas the language one speaks, which political party one supports and what religion is observed is more related to one's upbringing.⁶

⁵ Bachelard, *Poétique De L'espace. (English) The Poetics of Space*. p.17

⁶ Henry D. Schlinger, 'The Almost Blank Slate: Making a Case for Human Nurture', *Skeptic (Altadena, CA)*, 11/2 (2004), pp.34-44.

Personality and emotions fall into the grey area in between these two. For these traits, the generally accepted notion is that, both nature and nurture hold relatively equal significance.⁷

Therefore identity is constructed using the strengths and weaknesses one inherits from one's ancestors to build on the knowledge gathered from the environment. However, according to Brian Boyd, a Professor in the Department of English at the University of Auckland, the role biology plays must not be underestimated because behaviour is largely a biological adaptation that is responsible for the responses to the environment seen in both genders.⁸

To stress the role of common human nature does not deny enormous cultural differences. But these differences are made possible by the evolution of the mind. Without the complex shared architecture of the mind, culture would not be possible; because of that shared design, there are many universals across cultures.⁹

The 'universals'¹⁰ referred to by Brian Boyd, allude to the tendency for the female to take the responsibility of making a home more seriously than the male, because it is of prime importance that her children are nurtured in a safe and comfortable environment to ensure the survival of her genes into the next generation.¹¹

An interesting instinct found in nature that can be discussed in relation to the predisposition of a woman to homemaking is the nesting instinct. This phenomenon is generally described as an almost incessant need to clean and prepare the home or the nest for the birth of young.¹²

There appears to be a deliberate pattern of preparation that an expectant mother follows that is an instinctive pathway in the brain.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brian Boyd, 'Jane, Meet Charles: Literature, Evolution, and Human Nature', *Philosophy and Literature*, 22/1 (1998), pp.1-30, p.2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David C. Geary, 'Evolution and Proximate Expression of Human Paternal Investment', *Psychological Bulletin*, 126/1 (Jan 2000), pp.55-78.

¹² Deborah Skolnik, 'A Need to Nest', *Parents* 78/3 (2003), p.167.

Although this trait is by no means universal it has been noted to occur in both animal and human populations and is usually referred to as a female trait.¹³ It could be argued that this particular instinct plays a significant role for the majority of those who find themselves in the position of being principal caretaker of the home because although essentially associated with the period close to giving birth, these standards are effectively continuous. This ideal, when combined with the host of images of the stereotypical housewife, to which the female is subjected to through the print media, film and television, can for some become an imperative component of the role of homemaker. Personally it was considered integral.

Early childhood experience is considered especially important to the development of one's identity.¹⁴ Ivy L. Wallace's book *Pookie in Search of a Home* holds great personal significance. The story describes the feelings associated with home according to Pookie, a little white rabbit with wings and his friend, the elf, Nommy-Nee.¹⁵ (Appendix p.49)

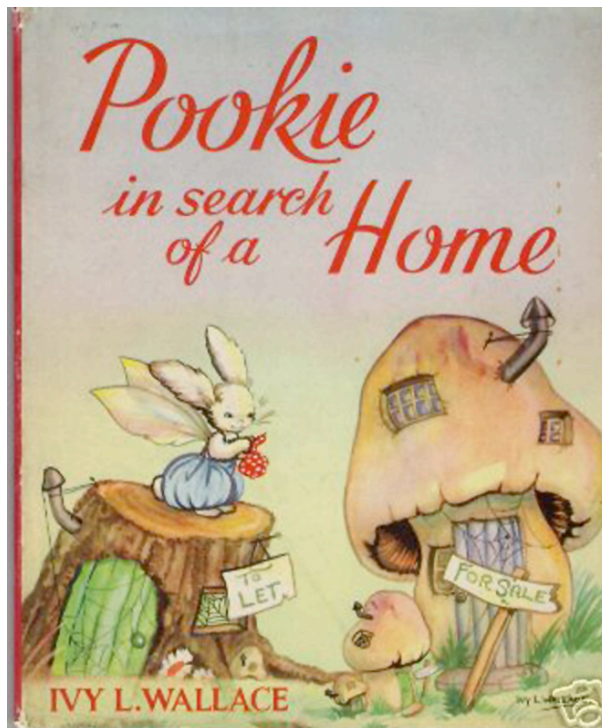


Figure 1 - Ivy L. Wallace, *Pookie in Search of a Home*, 1951
© 2007 Ivy L. Wallace. Image reproduced courtesy of Pookie Productions Ltd.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Schlinger, 'The Almost Blank Slate: Making a Case for Human Nurture'.

¹⁵ Ivy L. Wallace, *Pookie in Search of a Home* (London, Glasgow: W.M. Collins Sons and Co. Ltd, 1951). p.1

To have this story read to me, as a child, cemented this fanciful notion of home into my young mind. Especially sentimental, I now knew how *home* was to appear, the aromas that should be present and the warm atmosphere I needed to create to attain this ideal in the future. If I close my eyes I can hear my mother's voice reading the words with a gentle musical quality which not only emphasised its content also established an understanding of her expectations for me. Although Pookie and his friends were not female, the book was written and illustrated by a female and was understood to display qualities associated with being female. This work provided a powerful case. These expectations became personal expectations and making a home would remain one of the most important tasks in my life.

For twenty-six years I managed to meet my perceived obligations. I married and we planned and built a house together and had three children. When 'reality' intruded and I divorced, I was rudely awakened. The imaginary, impossible dream of *home* had slipped away, become transparent, an illusion. British philosopher and popular author Alain de Botton in his book *The Architecture of Happiness* states,

We may need to have made an indelible mark on our lives, to have married the wrong person, pursued an unfulfilling career into middle age or lost a loved one before architecture can begin to have any perceptible impact on us, for when we speak of being 'moved' by a building we allude to a bitter-sweet feeling of contrast between the noble qualities written into a structure and the sadder wider reality within which we know them to exist. A lump rises in our throat at the sight of beauty from an implicit knowledge that the happiness it hints at is the exception.¹⁶

For me the building that this passage alludes to is the *house* and the *home* I wished it could be. This perfect place was never a reality. It only ever existed in my imagination. So the house, being symbolic for this aim for perfection, is an important concept within my research.

The need for cleanliness was high on a housewife's agenda, which according to the personal options available when completing the census, was also my profession. As a rule, people who deal with the everyday events that constitute being a housewife, would attest to the fact that the very nature of this repetitive work could be considered an attempt to hold back chaos.

¹⁶ Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (London: Penguin, Hamish Hamilton, 2006) p.22.

Believed to be a state of complete disorder and confusion, chaos is a system where unpredictability is inherent and slight differences in initial conditions can cause extreme and random results over time and space.¹⁷ Housework can be seen as an endeavour to erase the remains of the lived events that occur in the house and could be considered the order inherent in the system by which the, initially small, reminders of life that continue to grow and threaten to explode into chaos, are contained.

Likewise the order inherent in the natural systems maintained by insects, especially those that live collectively like bees, ants and termites, could be compared with this 'contained chaos' that housework represents. The workers in these insect colonies toil unremittingly with relatively little reward for themselves other than the reduction or elimination of negative stimulus.¹⁸

Jennifer Fewell, Associate Professor in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Colorado, has completed extensive research into Behavioral Ecology. In research into the division of labour among insect groups Fewell suggests a human comparison,

Division of labor also appears frequently within social species, including humans. As an example, we can imagine an apartment where housemates share tasks. Used dishes pile up in the sink, producing a continuously increasing stimulus. The dishes go unnoticed until the threshold of the one most sensitive to them is met, and he or she washes them. This removes the dishes as a stimulus, further reducing the likelihood that the other group members will ever wash them. The result is a dishwashing specialist (much to his/her dismay), and a set of non-dishwashers. Similar interactions across other chores, from cleaning the bathroom to taking out the garbage, generate a division of labor for the household.¹⁹

Thus it can be understood how the system of housework is divided among the group known as the family. The homemaker, often the most irritated by the accumulation of the tasks within the home, assumes the bulk of the responsibilities in order to reduce the associated stress.

¹⁷ Gerald I Fogel, 'Gender as Soft Assembly'. by Adrienne Harris Hillsdale (Book Review), *International Journal of Psychoanalysis, London*, 87/4 (Aug 2006), pp. 1164-70.

¹⁸ Jennifer H. Fewell, 'Social Insect Networks', *Viewpoint*, 301/5641 (2003), p.1869.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

For some this stress can spill over into a neurosis or perhaps the illness called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or (OCD). An account that describes OCD and its comparisons to rituals and ceremonial behaviour, as performed by numerous societies throughout the world, by the anthropologists Siri Dulaney and Alan Page Fiske suggests,

Rituals often involve washing and other forms of purification, orientation to thresholds and boundaries, and colors (sic) that have special significance. Rituals tend to involve precise spatial arrays and symmetrical patterns, stereotyped actions, repetitive sequences, rigidly scrupulous adherence to rules (and often the constant creation of new rules), and imperative measures to prevent harm and protect against immanent dangers. These features typify rituals, but they also define a psychiatric illness, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (cf. American Psychiatric Association 1987).²⁰

Dulaney and Fiske's research says that because there is evidence that ritualistic behaviours manifest in a culturally approved manner they are accepted while the behaviours associated with OCD have no apparent reason for their manifestation and are therefore considered neuroses. However their similarities suggest the behaviours stem from the same basic organisational principals of the brain.²¹

There is also evidence that deficits in memory and attention are implicated in symptoms of OCD. According to Jeffrey Muller and John E. Roberts, researchers from the Department of Psychology of The State University of New York, sufferers of OCD report less confidence in their judgements of personal memory, particularly visual memory. Muller and Roberts state that OCD patients require vivid memory recall to discern between reality and imagination, particularly when the memory relates to a perceived threat (e.g. hygiene, safety etc). An inability to forget the actions associated with the removal of the threat becoming the subject's primary focus.²²

Housework, perceived as essential to the role of homemaker and its relationship to the scientific research raised, is referred to in two of my more recent works, *House Wash* and *Memory Cupboard*. In *House Wash*, a short video work, a small perspex house (a miniature replica of my childhood home), is washed in the kitchen sink.

²⁰ Alan Page Fiske and Siri Dulaney, 'Cultural Rituals and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Is There a Common Psychological Mechanism?' *Ethos*, 22/3 (Sept, 1994), p.245.

²¹ Ibid.

²² John E Roberts and Jeffrey Muller, 'Memory and Attention in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Review', *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 19 (2005), pp.1-28, p.11.



Figure 2 - Angela Femia, *House Wash*, 2006

Already clean this pristine, transparent object is placed in an empty sink and held under running water. The shiny surface of the metal sink illuminating the object as it goes through the processes associated with cleaning. Green, liquid soap is poured from above and lands on the roof making suds appear instantly. Hands work knowingly, going through the motions, almost automatically. Rinsed and dried, every spot erased. At triple the normal speed, the work becomes comical. An audio component adds to the sense of the ridiculous as bumps, splashes and squeaks accompany the visuals. The obsessive nature of the actions represent the chaos associated with housework and the washing and cleaning represent an attempt to maintain order. Together they allude to a hope for the *perfect home*.

The installation *Memory Cupboard* is predominantly an introspective interpretation focussing on similar concerns. In this work I placed a series of perspex house sculptures in a cupboard. The cupboard was typical of the 1950s style of furniture. A reddish-blond, reconstituted, timber construction of symmetrical design with small, squat, splayed legs. Dinnerware could be displayed in the open upper shelves and other household goods could be hidden behind the sliding doors beneath. Drawers and a drinks cabinet held the central position both horizontally and vertically.

The fact that this piece of furniture was a container for special household objects gave it immediate appeal. That it was an object with resonances of my childhood was also of importance.

Perspex houses of increasing size were placed either side of the drinks cabinet like prized possessions. The houses sat motionless on the cupboard and from left to right each was a mirror, reversed reflection of the other.



Figure 3 - Angela Femia, *Memory Cupboard*,
Video Installation prior to projection, 2006

Interaction between myself, the cupboard and the houses was videoed. This took the form of a monotonous activity where the perspex houses were removed from behind the sliding doors and drawers, wiped with a white cloth and placed onto the upper shelves of the cupboard. The resulting video was projected onto the object itself and looped so that the process was continuous and incessant. The continual movement across the object, where one sees the object itself from a time in the past, suggests the cupboard may retain a kind of memory. The perspex houses signify different facets of personal memory. The cupboard, a container, signifies the Self. The symbolism inherent in the cupboard and the house are recognised as attempts to maintain the order of both the household duties and memories.



Figure 4 - Angela Femia, *Memory Cupboard*,
Video Installation with projection, 2006

Recently *Memory Cupboard* appeared in the group show *Migrating Within* at Firstdraft Gallery in Sydney. For technical reasons there was a need for a major re-configuration of the work which resulted in a decision to paint the cupboard white. This afforded a lighter ground for the projection and enabled the moving image to be seen more clearly. Although the subtlety of the work disappeared, to some degree, the underlying concepts were still apparent. Critical comments made during the exhibition, described the work as 'channelling a cleaning obsession' and 'domestic angst'. Although these comments showed insight, the work's connection to memory was essentially overlooked. The cupboard's whiteness gave it a deathlike appearance not present in its original form. This could have emphasised the obsessive actions and domesticity apparent in the objects themselves and consequently clouded or erased the reference to memory which had been the original intention. A positive result of dealing with this problem is the idea for a new body of work where numerous items of furniture are painted white, obscuring their original form.



Figure 5 - Angela Femia, *Memory Cupboard*, Video Installation detail, 2007

Two artworks, important to my research, that physically connect images of the woman and the house are Louise Bourgeois' *La Femme Maison*, a drawing from 1947 and *Colorado Springs, Colorado*, a photograph by Robert Adams from 1968.

The work of contemporary artist Louise Bourgeois is often interpreted as being influenced by the dysfunctional family situation apparent during her childhood, the anxiety it generated, and the isolation and alienation she is said to have felt while raising her three small children.²³

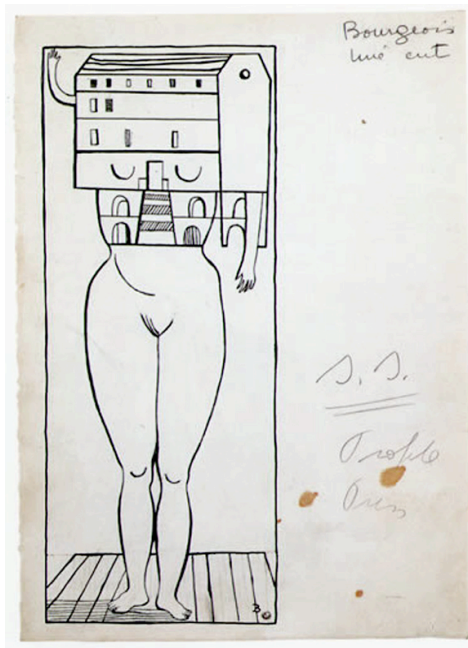


Figure 6 - Louise Bourgeois, *La Femme Maison*, 1947
© 2007 Louise Bourgeois. Image reproduced courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

La Femme Maison a simple line drawing depicting a naked woman whose upper body and head are composed of a house, is one of an ongoing series entitled *Femme Maison*. In this work small arms exit both sides of the structure, windows appear as eyes that are closed and the centrally located doorway resembles a nose. The stairway leading up to the door, emulating a mouth, completes the picture. The combination of images of the woman with the house implies their permanent union and suggests they are one in the same.

²³ Julie Nicoletta, 'Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan', *Woman's Art Journal*, 13/2 (Autumn 1992), pp.21-26.

In a critique of these works by Julie Nicoletta, Associate Professor, History of Art and Architecture at the University of Washington, Bourgeois' influences are questioned,

However, the Femmes-Maisons beg interpretations beyond that of personal experience. In earlier images Bourgeois explores not only her own history but also issues of femininity, psychoanalysis, and communication. Throughout her career she has presented ambiguities of gender identity, often through a denial of individuality. Through the duplicity of the Femmes-Maisons, the artist explores problems of gender differentiation, particularly when a woman is forced to find her own identity in terms of a man. But perhaps the most overlooked matter in Bourgeois's (sic) is the dilemma of communication.²⁴

Recognising feelings that are not uncommon for women with young children, Nicoletta suggests Bourgeois is 'universalising women's domestic and societal roles and their place in the systems of communication.'²⁵

This work, from the series *Femme Maison*, makes direct reference to this inability to communicate because the woman, whose face is morphed inside the house, can no longer speak.

Another work that touches on a similar theme is Robert Adams', *Colorado Springs, Colorado*. In this photograph the silhouette of a woman is seen in a central position within the image of the house. Portrayed in shadow, both the torso and head of the woman are small in comparison with the house. Seen through the window, the half-figure is nearly completely encased.

Known for his interest in how humans impinge on the natural environment, Adams' work also discusses the reverse, nature's invasion of our seemingly ordered world. Interested in the built environment Adams has taken many photographs of suburbia and America's urban sprawl often offering evidence of human existence within vast, vacant landscapes.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Leo Rubinfien, 'Perfect Uncertainty (Robert Adams and the American West)', *Art in America*, 90/3 (2002), pp.(110-20).

It is difficult to consider Adam's work as separate from the issues present at the time this photograph was taken. America, in the late 1960s, was in the grip of the Second-Wave²⁷ of feminist thinking and this is sure to have informed the work. Unlike First-Wave feminism, (the feminist movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which primarily focused on gaining the right of women's suffrage), Second-Wave feminism provoked extensive theoretical discussion about the origins of women's oppression, the nature of gender, and the role of the family.²⁸ Adams' work communicates a sense of isolation and alienation that can accompany feminist ideas of suburbia. An intense light causing the woman to be viewed with no detail and only basic form, emphasises a melancholia and loneliness that is exaggerated by the woman's size in comparison with the house.



Figure 7 – Robert Adams, *Colorado Springs, Colorado*, 1968. © 2007 Robert Adams. Image reproduced courtesy J. Paul Getty Museum.

Like Bourgeois' *La Femme Maison*, Robert Adams' *Colorado Springs, Colorado* suggests the woman, the central character in the house, is simultaneously combined with and defined by the house.

Two artists who also deal with notions of home are the Australian Mathieu Gallois and German born Gregor Schneider. Unlike Bourgeois and Adams, these artists are more interested in home as a memory or an illusion than with the link between the house and the woman. Although characterised by vastly different aesthetics the works of Gallois and Schneider speak volumes about the same thing. Where Gallois' work has simplicity and an innocent perfection, Schneider's is complex and displays implications of guilt and perversion. Their commonality is an interest in the 'facade.'

²⁷ Anne E Cudd and Robin O Andreasen, *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, (2003) p.8.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.7

Born and raised in Rheydt, Germany, a traditional mining town, Gregor Schneider has spent most of his young life rearranging and altering his family home as an ongoing art project. The house he grew up in was part of the lead-making factory that has been in his family for five generations. The house, now known as *Totes Haus ur* or *Dead House ur*, sits next to the factory and acts as a buffer for the neighbours, who continue to complain about the factory's unsightliness and noxious fumes. When Gregor was sixteen he was given the family home in Rheydt after his parents moved to the suburbs. Since that time the house has been transformed. There are walls inside walls, doors that go nowhere; windows open to other windows and hallways become narrow. Rooms rotate and, according to reports, there is a constant feeling of dread. The outside of the house looks like any other in the street but the inside tells another story.²⁹

The art critic Gordon Burn, writing for the Guardian Newspaper in London, describes Gregor Schneider's work as being informed by the 'unheimlich' or un-homely. The unfamiliar, strange or foreign, this term also relates to the uncanny. Sigmund Freud in his essay from 1919, *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny), says the 'unheimlich' is the sensation where one is attracted to and repulsed by something at the same time.³⁰

This notion was explored in the installation work *Die Familie Schneider*, by Gregor Schneider, in 2004. Two adjacent terrace houses in London's Whitechapel became a perfect example of 'unheimlich' for visitors to the work. Two identical houses contained identical furniture, identical atmosphere and identical twins. Given keys the viewer entered without knocking and proceeded to explore the home as if a voyeur. Inside each place actors were hired to play identical parts. A woman in the kitchen, washing the dishes, remained with her back to the viewer and did not respond to conversation. Similarly a man in the upstairs bathroom moaned behind a shower curtain, ostensibly masturbating. Cigarette butts spilled out of ashtrays, the heat was oppressive and there was a heavy dank smell present.

²⁹ Gordon Burn, 'Houses of Horror', *The Guardian*, September, 22nd 2004.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny (Das Unheimliche, 1919)*, trans. James Strachey (XVII Standard Edition; London: Hogarth Press, (1955) pp.217-56.

Both houses were meticulously replicated in every last detail.³¹ According to Burn knowing the work, *Die Familie Schneider*, was a work of art, did not alter the uncomfortable feeling generated. Burn states,

Schneider's work...represents a kind of anti-sublime; what Jake Chapman has called, only half-jokingly, a "degenerate sublime". It takes art about as far from the pleasure principle as it can be taken.³²

Considering the work of the British artist Jake Chapman and his brother Dinos, these are relatively strong words described in Burn's account. The Chapman brothers came into prominence as part of the Young British Artists phenomenon in the early 1990s with work that could be described as equally 'unheimlich'.

Whether Schneider is recalling personal memories or suggesting the house has memories of its own is unknown but what can be understood is Schneider's, *Die Familie Schneider*, is concerned with 'the facade'. The intensity of the degradation evident inside the house is in sharp contrast to the outward appearance of the house.

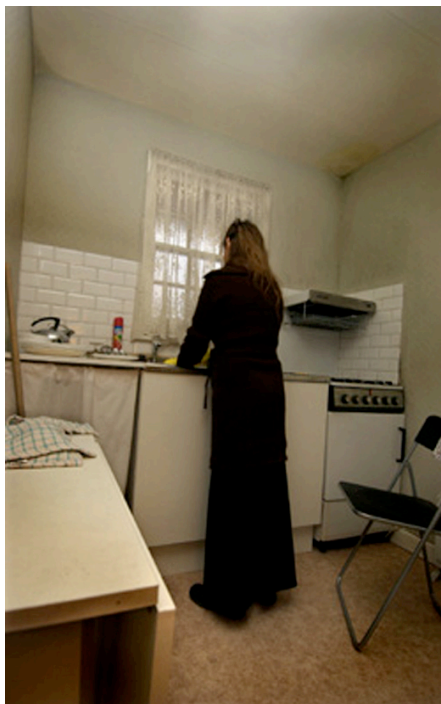


Figure 8 - Gregor Schneider, *Die Familie Schneider*, kitchen detail, 2004

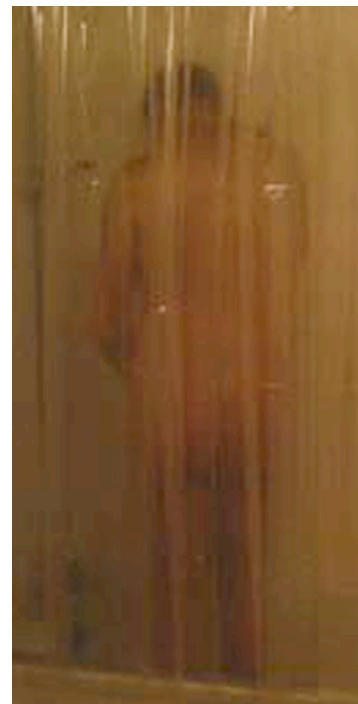


Figure 9 - Gregor Schneider, *Die Familie Schneider*, bathroom detail, 2004

Die Familie Schneider, Gregor Schneider. Commissioned and produced by Artangel, London. Images reproduced courtesy Artangel. Photographs by Thierry Bal.

³¹ Burn, 'Houses of Horror'.

³² *ibid*

Where Schneider was working behind closed doors manifesting his gruesome environments, Mathieu Gallois was working in the open. His work *Frontier*, from 1998, was an installation of the facade of a house made entirely of polystyrene. A replica house frontage of the style that could be called 'the perfect home' was attached to the front of another home in the then relatively new residential suburb of Blair Athol in Campbelltown in Sydney. Repeating exactly every detail of the building the 'fake' facade was immaculate. Homage to the dream of the home ownership *Frontier* took a step further than just describing a dream. It stepped into the realm of the sublime.



Figure 10 - Mathieu Gallois, *Frontier*, 1998.
© 2007 Mathieu Gallois. Image reproduced courtesy Mathieu Gallois.

Describing Gallois' work, the art critique Bruce James writing for the Sydney Morning Herald states,

Home goes very deep in us. Whether we solicit it or not – and some of us run the other way at the first sign of a gum-lined cul-de-sac or a kerb-side letterbox – home has a way of taking us unawares. Even if we come from “bad” or “broken” homes, we still cling to the possibility of happy nurture. *'Frontier'* was a polystyrene vouchsafe of that possibility.³³

Maybe these works by Schneider and Gallois were inspired by something much deeper than the purely personal thoughts of each artist. One, possibly responding to the repressed guilt of the German nation, still simmering under the surface, left over from World War II, and the other engaging with the hope offered by a young, aspirational Australia.

³³ Bruce James, 'In Every Dream Home, an Artwork', *Spectrum Arts, Sydney Morning Herald*, November 23rd 1998.

Ideas of home vary greatly and are shaped by every aspect of our being. Gender, personal history, family expectations, social conditioning and genetic inheritance each play an important part in their various understandings. The artists discussed, like myself, have tackled issues surrounding the symbolic nature of the house and its connection to notions of home, whether by making a direct correlation between the woman and the house or by referring to the ambiguous nature of 'the facade'. My work takes a more imaginary viewpoint, imbuing the house with a stillness and emptiness that encourages a sympathetic reading while still questioning the traditional attitudes contained within.



Figure 11 - Angela Femia, *Experimental Masters Work*, 2005



Figure 12 - Angela Femia, *Geelong House*, 2003

MEMORY

The term *memory*, as well as being a specific field of study, can also denote a number of different concepts. It is studied in disciplines ranging from neurobiology to psychology, psychiatry to philosophy. Memory is a mental process that connects our past with our present and so structures and defines our identity. Constantly in flux, overlaying and substantiating previous memories, the daily accrual of memory becomes the method by which this identity is maintained. Each successive experience is filtered, changed and interpreted to generate a continuous flow of information in which the present has a way to connect to the past and can anticipate the future.

This chapter will focus on a number of significant ideas surrounding memory that connect directly with my research. I will also examine how the idea of memory can be interpreted in the artwork of the Australian artist Aleks Danko.

In 1977, the American psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulick coined the term 'flashbulb memories'.³⁴ According to Daniel L. Schacter, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, Brown and Kulick's term describes memories of significant events with a high emotional content. These emotions, they say, activate a special brain mechanism referred to as 'Now Print'.³⁵ Much like a camera's flashbulb, Brown and Kulick hypothesised that the 'Now Print' mechanism preserves or freezes whatever happens at the moment we experience such an event and therefore one's context is of particular relevance.³⁶

Discussed in terms of historically significant memories like the assassination of President John F. Kennedy or September 11 as well as memorable occasions such as births or deaths in the family, they say that 'flashbulb memories' are consolidated because they trigger a kind of replay mechanism.³⁷

However, Schacter's research implies that the accuracy of this kind of memory is fallible. He says that because significant events are often remembered by a number

³⁴ Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1996) p.195.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of people at the same time the memory can be shared, thus altering the perception of the initial memory. This altered perception now includes those collective notions and subsequent reflections.³⁸ Schacter states that memories are also influenced by our expectations, imaginations and other ruminations as well as our goals and motives at the time of remembering.³⁹

The American Psychological Anthropologist, Axel Aubrun, commenting on the notion of flashbulb memories suggests that these kind of memories can be triggered and re-activated by contact with the places, objects, scents and sounds associated with the significant event. According to Aubrun, flashbulb memories are often connected to what he calls 'initiation rituals',⁴⁰

In initiation rituals, a signature of a group, place and time is performed and imprinted on the minds of novices. The initiates will then remain dependent on the context associated with the original ritual experience, presumably for their entire lives.⁴¹

These initiation rituals usually occur early in one's life and are powerful, identity affirming experiences. The combination of elements surrounding an emotional event, the initiation ritual reinforces our world-view, cementing our place in the world by generating solidarity among a group.⁴²

Significant places, objects, scents and sounds, then, are the signs connected to these initiation rituals that can trigger and consolidate the flashbulb-type memory. When these elements are again encountered they re-energise the memory.

Elaborating on these signs, Professor of Philosophy, Dr. Paul Crowther, discussing the Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, explains their connection to the work of art,

There are occasions, though, when we use signs in a much richer way; in a way that seeks to construct or re-construct some aspect of the world, in all its sensuous immediacy, i.e., as it might be encountered in perception itself. This is the realm of the imagination, and for Merleau-Ponty the work of art is essentially an imaginary or imaginatively re-constructed situation presented in a publicly accessible form.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Axel Aubrun, 'The Aesthetics of Kin Recognition', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 5/2 (June 1999), p.211.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Paul Crowther, 'Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art' E Husserl, R Kearney (Ed.), *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 22/2 (Spring, 1982), p.145.

The signs of my childhood have become significant to my research because by utilising them in my compositions and researching their importance for this paper I attempt to re-create their memory. Not only do they signify my identity they also elude to the identity of the group to which they belong.

The collective identity of a group (family, suburb, state, country or nation) is maintained primarily by the written and visual records of memory, known as history. History, like personal memory, can be distorted and exaggerated by the passage of time. The cultural theorist Dani Cavallaro in her book *Critical and Cultural Theory* states,

Since the second half of the 20th Century historiography has been the object of increasingly lively debates, primarily as a result of awareness on the part of historians, that descriptions of past events are unlikely to be totally objective and uncontaminated by personal values and opinions.⁴⁴

The cultural and personal narratives built on this recorded history, therefore, are open to question. In examining these narratives there would be little point in searching for stable forms of knowledge since their messages vary according to the ways in which ideology appropriates them.

Exposure to elements associated with childhood coupled with the dynamic remembering process in which omission, distortion and reconstruction play a role are therefore the concepts which underline how memory is integral to my research.

The way these notions of memory are active in my practical research will be explored by looking at *Robin Avenue*, a work I created in 2003.

An installation incorporating projected video footage, a number of variously sized boxes made of perspex, and sound, *Robin Avenue* was presented at the completion of my Honours candidature. Digital video, displaying glimpses of the housing commission homes in Robin Avenue, Norlane, a suburb of Geelong Victoria, was projected over the perspex objects and onto the floor of an installation space.

⁴⁴ Dani Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory: Thematic Variations* (London: Athlone, 2001) p.189.

The shiny transparent, constructions reflected smaller, blurred images back onto the walls and ceiling of the space. Distorted, reversed and floating, the constantly moving images, made it difficult to focus. A humming sound in the background was the only stabilising factor. The video of a suburban street, with its fleeting views of houses, picket fences, windows and front doors was captured from the window of a car during a visit to the area in the same year.

Migrants from Holland, following the devastation of World War II, my parents settled in the relatively new township of Norlane when they arrived in 1953. At that time Australia was in the grip of a massive influx of migrants and Norlane, offered hope for a safer future.

According to Dr. Warwick Eather, Senior Lecturer in Australian Studies at Charles Sturt University, who has completed extensive research into post-war housing, there was enormous pressure to house the large number of newly arrived migrants in the early 1950s with families resorting to make-do two-room dwellings, tents and partially completed dwellings. The Housing Commission provided accommodation for families unable to rent or to afford to purchase their own houses. Eather says that in 1947 the suburb Norlane appeared in Australia's Population Census and in that same year the Housing Commission began its house-building program.⁴⁵

Most of the housing was for employees at the Ford Motor plant and the nearby Shell oil refinery with over one thousand houses being prefabricated units imported from Holland and France. Coincidentally Norlane gathered a large Dutch community.⁴⁶

Upon revisiting the street where I had lived as a young child, profound feelings of joy and nostalgia washed over me. In the vivid memory it provoked I could see my mother, as she looked then, my father playing with my little sister in the front garden and could smell the scent of freshly cut grass. There was the faint sound of a radio playing in the background.

⁴⁵ Warwick Eather, *We Only Build Houses: The Commission 1945-60 - New Houses for Old Fifty Years of Public Housing in Victoria 1938-1988*, Elizabeth Wood Ellem, (Ed.), (The Ministry of Housing and Construction, Melbourne, 1988) pp.69-94.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Surrounded by the houses, footpaths and letterboxes I had known so long ago, my 'flashbulb'⁴⁷ memories were triggered and the 'Now Print'⁴⁸ function reactivated. The strong emotional reaction to my re-exposure to this place induced the idea for this work.

Although the memory it revealed was a simple romantic ideal of the 'happy family' in suburbia, time had clouded its reality. My memory was closer to a dream. *Robin Avenue* was an attempt to visualise this memory. Perhaps it could engender a similar response in others. The 'signs'⁴⁹ of a group utilised to evoke a sympathetic response to a personal and collective history.



Figure 13 - Angela Femia, *Robin Avenue*, 2003

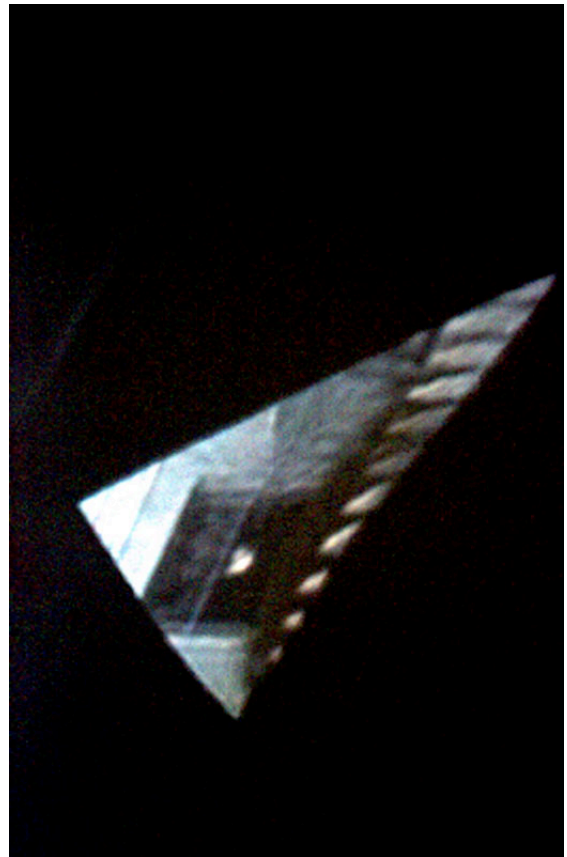


Figure 14 - Angela Femia, *Robin Ave detail*, 2003

A hint of nostalgia reverberated among the various elements of the work, gently blanketing the entire composition.

⁴⁷ Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Crowther, 'Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art' E Husserl, R Kearney (Ed.), p.145.

The American writer, activist and curator Lucy Lippard describes 'nostalgia', in her book *On the Beaten Track, Tourism, Art and Place*, in a way that resonates with my understanding. Lippard states,

Is there no word aside from the overly discredited nostalgia for the complex emotions we harbor (sic) about the past, about childhood, about loss and return? Nostalgia (from the Latin "return home") is defined in my dictionary as "severe homesickness---a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one' country or home." . . . This is not the way it's used in contemporary scholarship, however. The word has acquired a veneer of duplicity, of sentimental inauthenticity, (sic) an evil "construction" that seems distant from the original meaning, or at least from the way I use the word---to suggest the dreamlike process of memory.⁵⁰

An artist who also invokes memory by utilising the materials connected to the history and society of a particular time and place is Aleks Danko. Adelaide born artist Aleks Danko is well known for work that suggests, discusses, and interrogates the social, political and cultural landscape of Australia. Sculpture, installation and performance in addition to publicly commissioned work, Danko's practice covers a broad range of activities.

Born in 1950, Danko grew up in suburban Edwardstown, studied sculpture at the University of South Australia, and is currently based in Victoria. Danko's artwork reflects on his formative years and focuses predominantly on memories of life in the Australian suburbs with his parents who were migrants from the Soviet Ukraine. Refugees from Communism, Danko's parents arrived in South Australia in 1948.⁵¹

Daniel Thomas, retired Director of The Art Gallery of South Australia in the *Art and Australia* article *At Home Aleks Danko born Adelaide 7 April 1950*, describes one of Aleks Danko's most prominent works, *Songs of Australia Volume 3 AT HOME*,

His mother didn't tell him, and maybe he didn't know, that her cushion embroidery was an ideogram of the sacred centre of existence, fertilized by four zigzag-edged green rivers within the black unknown. Unwittingly, Danko has transferred the zigzags of life to the roof of this song of Australia. The centre of the world is wherever you find a source of psychic energy. *At Home* is surely Australia's best work of public art, so wonderfully right for its university site, so elegant and intelligent.⁵²

⁵⁰ Lucy Lippard, *On the Beaten Track, Tourism, Art and Place* (Taken Aback, or the Nostalgia Trap) New York: The New Press, 1999) p.153.

⁵¹ Daniel Thomas, 'At Home Aleks Danko Born Adelaide 7 April 1950', *Art and Australia*, Olympic Issue 38/1 (2000), pp. 92-97.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Thomas was describing Danko's red brick, house sculpture which was a public art project commissioned by the University of South Australia. One of a series of ongoing artworks entitled *Songs of Australia; Songs of Australia Volume 3 AT HOME* was an impenetrable brick construction, a scaled down version of a house, situated in the middle of the Lions Arts Centre Courtyard of the University.⁵³ Constructed entirely from the quintessential Australian building material, the red brick, the work made visible every childlike drawing of a house that one can bring to mind.

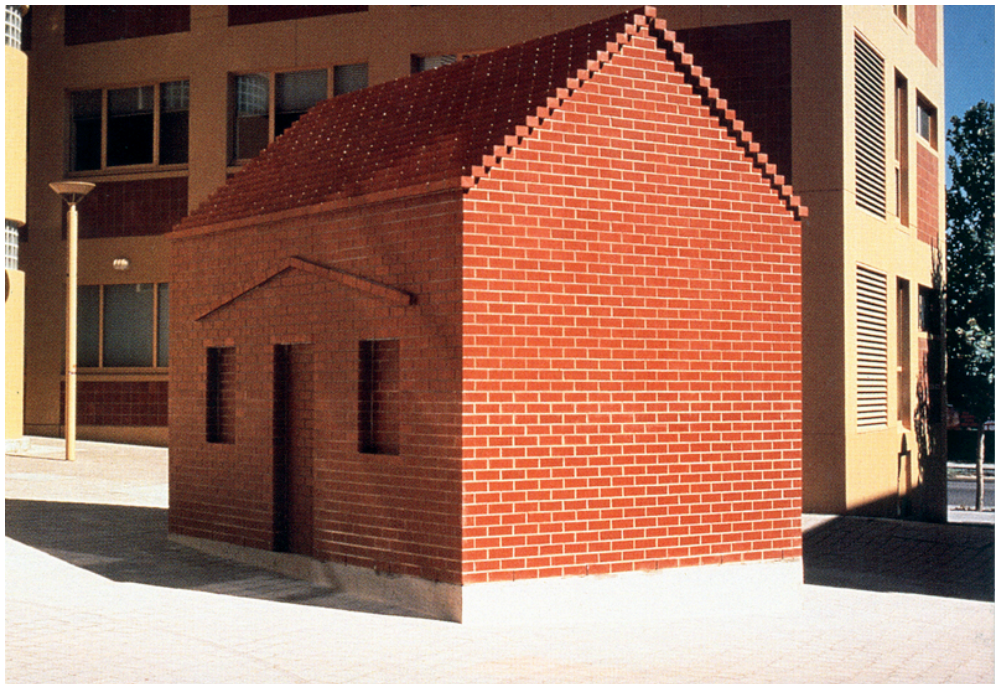


Figure 15 - Aleks Danko, *Songs of Australia Volume 3 AT HOME*, 1999
© 2007 Aleks Danko. Image reproduced courtesy Aleks Danko and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

With no way in or out the house sculpture persuades the viewer to visualise their own interior. The intention according to Thomas was to connect the two sites of learning, the home and the school. Utilising the symbol for home, the house, Danko successfully mined our collective memories of that enigmatic site. As mentioned before in Daniel Thomas's quote about the work, Danko had unknowingly reinterpreted the characteristics of his Ukrainian background by repeating the zigzag patterning of his mother's embroidery. Perhaps Danko was employing the 'signs'⁵⁴ of his childhood to create this work of art.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Crowther, 'Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art' E Husserl, R Kearney (Ed).

To a great extent Danko's work stems from the fact that he, like myself, is a second generation Australian. Children of migrants straddling two cultures, conceivably the nature of our upbringing had heightened our attention to detail, or maybe it had thrown into question our state of belonging. The house is the embodiment of these concerns.

Even though my work is similarly consumed with the symbolic use of the house and its overt connection with Australian suburbia of the fifties and sixties, this is where the resemblance ends. Although not overtly displayed in this artwork, Danko's practice often has a political, satirical edginess that taunts Australian suburbia in an effort to draw attention to the comfortable indifference and parochialism, he sees evident there. Motivated by the intolerance of difference he observes in the Australian population, in particular within its political sphere, Danko's work often questions authority. My work, like Danko's, utilises our collective memories of home but does so for an entirely different purpose. It approaches feminist concerns, is primarily driven by personal ideals and links the symbol of the house with dreams, hopes and aspirations. Although sympathetic to Danko's political outlook, my work is far removed from these anxieties.

Danko's use of the house, in this way, came into question in a later work from his *Songs of Australia series; Songs of Australia Volume 16:shhh, go back to sleep (an un-australian dob-in mix)*.



Figure 16 - Aleks Danko, *Songs of Australia Volume 16:shhh, go back to sleep (an un-australian dob-in mix)*, 2004. © 2007 Aleks Danko. Image reproduced courtesy Aleks Danko and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

An installation in Federation Square, for the National Gallery of Victoria which integrated works on paper (generic renditions of Danko's family home), a house-like structure, floodlights and a sound component (satirical commentary about Australia's suburban mediocrity), this work was specifically targeted.

Robert Nelson, a prolific writer on the nature of visual language and current Associate Dean Research and Graduate Studies at Monash University has written extensively for the *Age Newspaper* in Melbourne. According to Nelson, Danko's symbolic use of the house is problematic. Nelson states,

The house - if I can mix metaphors - is a red herring. It is neither responsible for complacency nor bigotry; nor is it a logical centre of alienation. A house can be a vessel of trashy sentiment and bile or enlightenment and compassion. It depends on the tenant. The building stock and the institution of the family are irrelevant to the discourse of national priorities to which Danko addresses himself. Our little boxes in Box Hill are no more alienating than the flats of Munich or Moscow. Without a direct sociological rationale, the icon of the house as incubator of social obtuseness defaults to a snobbish cliché.⁵⁵

I would agree with this reading. I object to Danko's political use of the house archetype, perhaps because of my gender. The woman and the house being historically linked effectively makes Danko's work a personal critique. It is acknowledged that Danko successfully mines the Australian icon of the house for its emotive value, as is clearly demonstrated by my opinion, nevertheless, his appropriation sullies its deeper connections to our collective psyche. The Australian people are renowned for their ability to laugh at themselves and suburbia is often held up to ridicule but in my opinion, this work steps over a boundary or perhaps misses its mark.

Danko does, however, appropriate the images of his own memories to articulate these critiques.

⁵⁵ Robert Nelson, 'Songs of Australia Volume 16', *The Age, Melbourne*, 31st March 2004.

Carol Becker, artist, art historian, and Dean of Faculty at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, writing about the prominent German philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, states that for Marcuse art is a location where one can experience freedom.⁵⁶ A physical object, dance, video, film or event, art is also a psychic location, where rules that normally govern daily life are suspended.⁵⁷ Art, according to Marcuse says Becker,

challenges the monopoly of the established reality by creating fictitious worlds in which one can see mirrored that range of human emotion and experience that does not find an outlet in the present reality. In a sense the fabricated world becomes more real than reality itself.⁵⁸

and that,

It is a reminder of what a truly integrated experience of oneself in society might be, a remembrance of gratification a sense of purpose beyond alienation. Art can embody a tension which keeps hope alive - a memory of the happiness that once was and that seeks its return.⁵⁹

By constructing a visible, concrete reality from the immaterial illusion of memory the artist, in some sense, simulates a primeval characteristic of being alive, the characteristic of emotion.

This chapter has focused on the reason why memory is important to my research. It has also explored how this is visually evident, through allusion, in the artwork I create. The significance of memory to the construction of one's identity and ideas of *home* cannot be underestimated as it is the fundamental component apparent to both. It will be appropriate to remember these things as I now turn the discussion to the notion of *place*.

⁵⁶ Carol Becker, *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society and Social Responsibility*, (Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art); New York: Routledge, 1993 p.117., including quotes from Herbert Marcuse 'The Aesthetic Dimension', Beacon Press, 1978, p.1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

PLACE

Our understanding of reality is, at all times, bound to a particular point of view, a point of view which relies implicitly on the place nature, society and history has already assigned to us. For the most part this perspective remains unquestioned but the moment we become aware of this we can begin to interrogate our own assumptions. In this chapter I will interrogate assumptions about the place nature, society and history has assigned to me.

With this information I will explore the significance of *place* to my research by examining one of my earlier works and the artwork of the British artist Rachel Whiteread.

Mutable and transportable, our understanding of *place* has links to both the past through memory and the future through imagination. It exists as a unique conceptual framework from which we garner our understanding of ourselves. It has the power to evoke emotion, affect behaviour and is frequently associated with relationships or events as well as locations. In the opinion of Richard Restak M.D., an American neurologist and author of many books on the subject of brain research, there is a general consensus among scientists and researchers of the human mind that what separates human beings from other members of the animal realm is a consciousness of Self. Consciousness of Self, he says, gives the human being the ability to make sense of one's place in the context of time and space and reflect on it.⁶⁰ This self-reflection affords the human being the opportunity to consider not only these things but also how these things have come about.

The knowledge that my parents met and married in a country far from the country in which I now find myself has coloured every aspect of my life. Born in The Netherlands in the early 1930s my parent's background is of a particular time and place that is especially distinct from my own. Their environment, experience and way of life was vastly different.

⁶⁰ Richard Restak M.D., *The Mind* (New York: Bantam, 1988).

According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, I was not alone. In 1953, the year my parents arrived in Australia, 42,883 migrants arrived to make a new life here.⁶¹

World War Two marked a change in the pace of Australia's immigration history. The Australian Government planned an ambitious post-war reconstruction and expansion program. Australia showed an enormous potential for growth and could offer people who wished to leave war-torn Europe an optimistic future. The perception that Australia needed a larger population was emphasised by threats to Australia in World War Two. There was a feeling that such a small population in charge of a vast land could not defend itself. These perceptions gave way to the catch cry 'Populate or Perish'. The scene was set for an extraordinary post war immigration program supported by virtually all sections of the community and fuelled by the post war economic boom.⁶²

Almost six million immigrants have settled in Australia since the Second World War. Most decades since the war have seen over one million immigrants arrive, with over one and a quarter million arriving in the 1950s. Apart from the dominance of the United Kingdom, the source countries have shifted from mainly European countries in the fifties and sixties to non-European countries in the eighties and nineties. Australia's policy of accepting predominantly Anglo-Celtic immigrants was relaxed immediately after the War due to labour shortages, an inability to attract sufficient immigrants from the United Kingdom and the existence of several million displaced persons from Eastern Europe. The White Australia Policy was gradually dismantled until by the mid-1970s it was totally abolished, allowing for greater numbers of immigrants from non-European countries.⁶³

So it was with this growing population and the promise of the baby boom to come that Australia moved into the second half of the twentieth century.

⁶¹ www.immigov.au, 'Immigration: Federation to Century's End', (report prepared by Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs: Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, Forward by Minister Philip Ruddock, (accessed 4th May 2007), p.23.

⁶² *Ibid.* p.3

⁶³ *Ibid.* p.24

My early years were marked by the cultural differences my parents experienced as they attempted to make a life for themselves in Australia with their family. Due to the overwhelming sense of excitement and anticipation for the future, my parents were not overly concerned with these differences, nevertheless, I was made aware of them at every opportunity.

*'The people here are lazy, they don't want to work,
it's that "she'll be right, mate!" attitude.
The food, oh how terrible! A steak with eggs and chips for breakfast!
The coffee was disgusting, they didn't have any idea.
. . . and where are the church bells?'
(things I remember my mother saying over the years) ⁶⁴*

This background, then, tempered my sensibilities and affected my emergent perspective. Like the other newly arrived migrants to Australia, at that time, my personal experiences were clouded by and linked to my European heritage.

According to Adam Sharr, Lecturer and Architect at the Welsh School of Architecture University of Cardiff, the German thinker Martin Heidegger remains a key figure in the philosophical history of *place*.⁶⁵ Sharr says that Heidegger describes *place* as the situation of human existence and that places remain bound to the actions and routines of the individuals who dwell in them.⁶⁶ Sharr states,

For Heidegger, the physical structure of the world is understood as a matrix of 'places' configured by social and intellectual structures of their inhabitants. But this is also a reciprocal relationship. Human social and intellectual structures are determined by physical constraints of their specific situations. To Heidegger, 'place', known through the sensory engagement of a human mind with its situation, was more descriptively powerful than 'space', measured mathematically by dimension.⁶⁷

Therefore *space* to Heidegger is an abstract construction based upon the understanding of the world given to us by *place*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty the French phenomenologist philosopher, whose ideas were closely aligned with Heidegger's, went a step further by saying that all knowing was body-centered and dependent on the immediate sensations of the body and its

⁶⁴ Angela Femia

⁶⁵ Adam Sharr, 'The Professors House', in Sarah Menin (Ed.), *Constructing Place Mind and Matter* (London : NewYork: Routledge, 2003), p.131.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

operations.⁶⁸ In the essay *Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art*, Professor of Philosophy Paul Crowther says that for Merleau-Ponty 'The body does not find meaning pre-existent in the world, but calls such meaning into existence, through its own activity.'⁶⁹

As a wife and mother for over two decades, a great deal of my most significant activity has occurred in the house. This activity has created personal meaning and in an effort to understand this more fully, it will be beneficial to again consider the contribution of Gaston Bachelard.

Gaston Bachelard, wrote extensively about the symbolic importance of the house to the understanding of our place in the world.⁷⁰ In his work *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard recalls the words of the American author William Goyen from his novel *House of Breath*,

That people could come into the world in a place they could not at first even name and had never known before; and that out of a nameless and unknown place they could grow and move around in it until its name they knew and called with love, and call it HOME, and put roots there and love others there; so that whenever they left this place they would sing homesick songs about it and write poems of yearning for it, like a lover.⁷¹

Bachelard elaborates, 'Thus, on the threshold of our space, before the era of our own time, we hover between awareness of being and loss of being.'⁷²

With these philosophical understandings in mind we now come to the description of my work *1939*. An installation completed during my undergraduate studies, *1939* represents an attempt to go beyond my own memories to a place before memory.

A filing cabinet, emanating a golden light, invites the viewer to peer within. Inside this locked repository images of my grandparents and great-grandparents, sandblasted onto fused glass, are displayed, visible only through small openings made where labels were originally placed.

⁶⁸ Paul Crowther, 'Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art', E Husserl, R Kearney (Ed.), *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 22/2 (Spring, 1982), p.138.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p.139

⁷⁰ Bachelard, *Poétique De L'espace. (English) The Poetics of Space*. p.58

⁷¹ William Goyen, *House of Breath* (New York: Random House, 1950) p.40.

⁷² Bachelard, *Poétique De L'espace. (English) The Poetics of Space*. p.58

An old family film, which was converted to video, is projected over the filing cabinet and onto the wall behind. A mirror splits the film's image causing it to be projected on a sidewall as well. Tango music popular in the thirties and the faint smell of perfume permeate the room. The film portrays the journey to Australia by close relatives, a cousin of my mother's and his wife, who left Holland in 1939. Imagery, depicting the streets of Rotterdam filled with commuters of all kinds, the family saying farewell at the train station and endless views of the ocean taken from the ship in which they eventually sailed to reach Australia, encompasses this grainy, out-of-focus record. This work represented a kind of pre-history, the installation room and filing cabinet symbolising the place of my being prior to existence. The room and the office-like repository are examples of the ever-present 'container' in my compositions. Places to keep things safe, to keep things organised and to ensure I maintain control.



Figure 17 - *1939*, Angela Femia, Video Installation detail, 2002

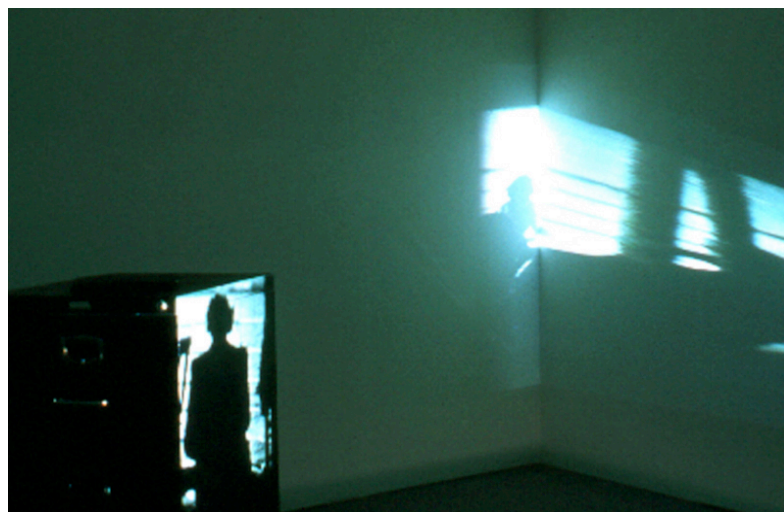


Figure 18 - *1939*, Angela Femia, Video Installation, 2002

By utilising the images of my history combined with the sounds and scents of this previous time the artwork was imbued with a sense of the place of my own subjective resonance. Unknown consciously but unconsciously understood.

This unconscious understanding was present also when I accompanied my mother on a trip to Holland in 1998. The trip fulfilled the long-held promise that one day I would accompany her there. As the plane touched down I became overwhelmed with an emotion that cannot be explained. It was as if my genes were happy that they were home. Ridiculous as that sounds no other explanation is satisfactory. My picture was complete, the bump of the plane landing akin to a puzzle finding its own last piece. To compound this uncanny sensation I now recall another. While my mother and I waited to alight and I anticipated the greeting we would receive from our Dutch family I was concerned to make a good impression, so the following conversation ensued,

<i>'What should I say Mum?' 'Teach me something quickly, in Dutch!'</i>	<i>(Myself)</i>
<i>'What do you want to say?'</i>	<i>(Mother)</i>
<i>'I am so glad that I am here.'</i>	<i>(Mother)</i>
<i>'Alright.' 'Ik ben zo blij dat ik hier ben.'</i>	<i>(Mother)</i>
<i>'Perfect',</i>	<i>(Myself)</i>
<i>'IK BEN ZO BLIJ DAT IK HIER BEN.'</i>	<i>(Myself)</i>

This simple group of words articulated the sensation of my being. Not only had my mother returned home, so had I.

Successful in communicating a similar a sense of place is the work of British artist, Rachel Whiteread.

Whiteread began her career making casts of the insides of hot water bottles and the undersides of chairs. From here she graduated to larger interiors like offices, libraries and living rooms. By exploring the ghostly gaps between objects Whiteread conjures an absence into a substance. Thus giving form to the apparent empty spaces we have inhabited. Many of her most evocative pieces are private and domestic like the underside of a bed, a mattress or a wardrobe, the spaces above, below and behind everyday things and by doing so she memorialises the rituals associated with those objects (such as dining and bathing.) Some of these pieces are quite small using materials such as plaster, resin, rubber and cement, she explores the spaces we don't think about, the spaces we take for granted.

Whiteread achieved international recognition in 1993 for her first public art commission, entitled *House*, a concrete cast of the interior architectural space of an entire nineteenth century East London terrace house. Commissioned by Artangel, a United Kingdom based art institution committed to collaborating with artists who respond to the qualities and conditions of a particular place, *House* was a perfect example of the kind of work these sponsors were interested in. Central to the development of the project was finding the right *place*. This work, situated in the East End of London in an area which had recently seen wholesale demolition and was to be a designated green-corridor, was ripe for Whiteread's intervention.



Figure 19 - *House (during construction)*, Rachel Whiteread, 1993. Commissioned and produced Artangel, London. Image reproduced courtesy Artangel.

This last remaining terrace house, which Whiteread used as a template for her concretised duplicate, epitomized a model of community living that was quickly disappearing. Lamenting this fact or perhaps celebrating it *House* articulated a sense of the place this area had once been. What could not have been anticipated was that *House* became one of the most powerful and controversial public sculptures ever seen in England. A crucial part of the significance of the work arose from its demolition, which triggered huge debate among the public, the art fraternity and the media. This enabled the work to rise beyond its original manifestation to live on in the documentation which provided an ongoing expansion of the collective memory of the site. In the same year Whiteread became the first woman to be awarded the Tate Gallery's prestigious Turner Prize.

Janet Goleas, leading curator and art critic writing for the New York based magazine, *zingmagazine*, discusses Whiteread's work,

If Whiteread is part of the British invasion, she is counter to her fellow Brits in one more important way: hers is more an act of self-colonizing (sic) than of pioneering frontier territory or throwing over existing tropes. It is more about memory, temporality, and how to make a mark that says "I am not here." We're in the neighborhood of romanticism here, but we didn't bring any luggage. Whiteread is not picturing nothingness--not the abyss--not by a long shot. She is identifying the space between memory and experience. Pointing to it; naming the properties; stealing the innocence from, as it were, the unnameable. (sic) To the extent that we are all talking about the nature of being, Whiteread is hashing out the fundamentals of it.⁷³

'Identifying the space between memory and experience,'⁷⁴ Whiteread's work manages to articulate, a sort of 'pre-place', a place of prior understanding that both solidifies and dissolves time.

Similarly, my work approaches a transient and shifting territory that moves beyond a definite place, towards the indistinct regions more in common with the psyche and the Self.

Throughout my research I have come to recognise that my work attempts to articulate a personal sense of being 'out-of-place'. Gender, cultural difference and personal issues have informed this practice but have not been the entire driving force. There is an underlying unknowable source that urges me forward and with each new work I come a little closer to being 'in-place'.

The work that I present for my Masters candidature endeavours to capture this evanescent notion.

⁷³Janet Goleas, 'Rachel Whiteread - Review', *zingmagazine*, Vol. 3, New York, (1996), www.zingmagazine.com/zing3/reviews/023_luhring.html, accessed, 2nd May 2007.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has sought to uncover the characteristics of my research.

In my Masters studio work and this writing the symbol of the *house* has been explored both practically and theoretically. A container of and for my memories this structure has both protected and restricted me physically, emotionally and metaphorically. The way in which the house evokes the notion of *home* has been examined and discussed in terms of personal experience, relevant scientific and theoretical concepts and contemporary art practice. These domains have also been studied to determine why memory features so prominently in my work. The result of this exploration has been the discovery that I make art in order to collect, archive and ultimately understand my memories.

Finally, realising that a personal feeling of being out-of-place has fundamentally been the primary catalyst in these investigations is a revelation that excites me and suggests future possibilities. With this in mind I would like to conclude with this quote by Gaston Bachelard,

How many dwelling places there would be,
fitted one into the other,
if we were to realize (sic) in detail,
and in their hierarchical order,
all the images by means of which
we live our daydreams of intimacy.
How many scattered values
we should succeed in concentrating,
if we lived the images of our daydreams
in all sincerity.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Bachelard, *Poétique De L'espace. (English) The Poetics of Space.* p.31

Appendix

"One sunny autumn afternoon, Pookie, the little white rabbit with wings, flew through Bluebell Wood to see his friend Nommy-Nee. He landed on the doorstep of the elf's toadstool home. "Are you at home, Nommy-Nee? It's Pookie!" he called. "Come straight in, Pookie!" answered Nommy-Nee. "I'm very busy making blackberry jam! It's just beginning to set! Come and taste it!" Pookie hopped upstairs into the kitchen, which was full of the warm sweet smell of blackberries cooking. Over the glowing fir cone fire bubbled a shining copper pan of rosy-purple jam. "It tastes beautifully yummy!" said Pookie, licking the spoon. It was a dear little kitchen, with a fine toadstool table, rose-petal curtains and a beech leaf hearthrug. Some little mice were tidying the heather carpet, and everywhere was as clean and bright as a new penny. "I wouldn't change my home for anywhere else in the whole world, Pookie!" Nommy-Nee stirred his jam proudly. "It's not big or grand, but it's cosy and I can have my friends to tea whenever I like. Put the kettle on. There's a cherry-cake in the blue tin and cream in the yellow jug." "Wigglenose Rabbit has a nice home, too!" Pookie told him, his careful little paws busy among the elf's pretty yellow cups and saucers. "He has the finest front door in the Wood, and a patchwork quilt on his bed!" "There is nothing so nice as a home!" The little rabbit nodded, and poured honey tea out for them both from the red teapot. He thought of his own home with Belinda, the wood-cutter's little daughter. His bed was so cosy in her work-basket, and he remembered the long, happy, winter evenings, telling stories round a log fire until bedtime. "There's nothing as nice as a home!" he agreed."⁷⁶ (page 14)

⁷⁶ Wallace, *Pookie in Search of a Home*.

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STUDIO WORK

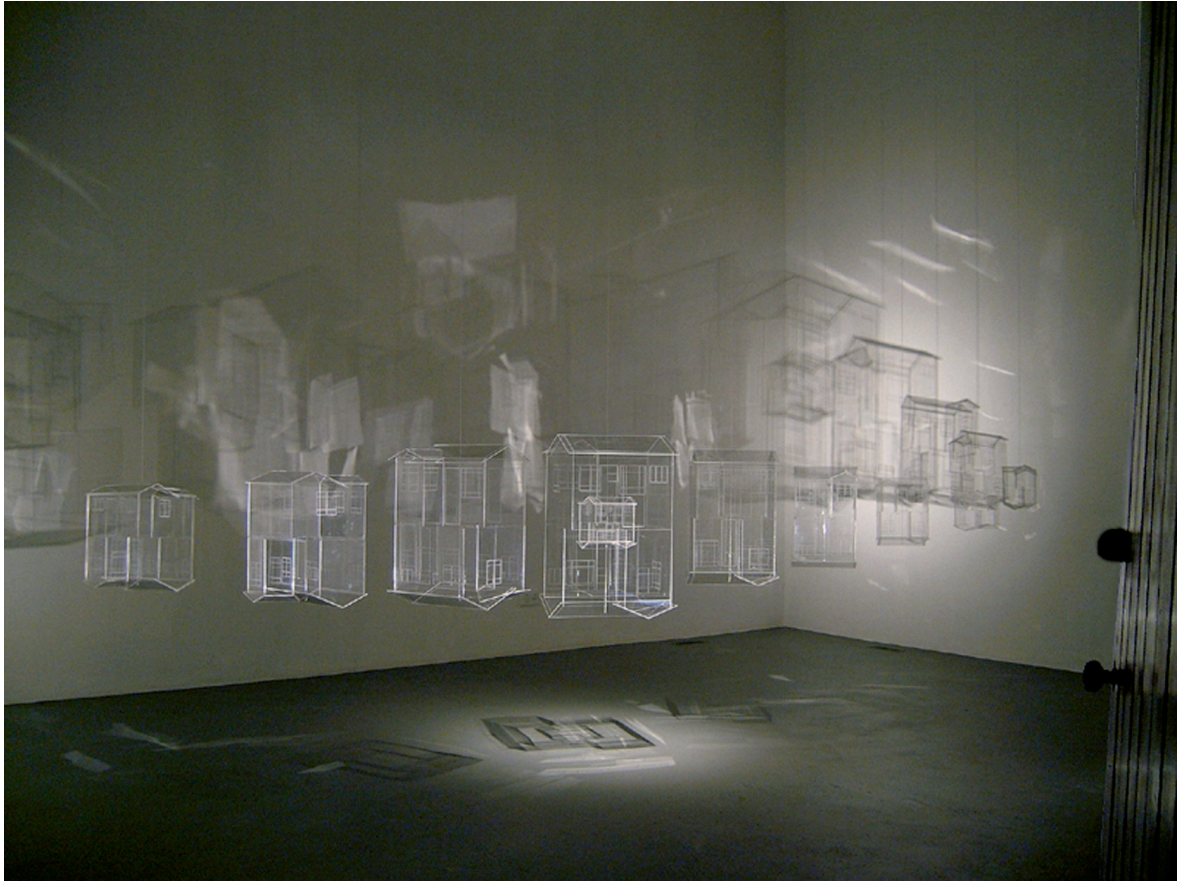


Figure 20 - *Ik ben zo blij dat ik hier ben*, Installation view, Angela Femia, 2007

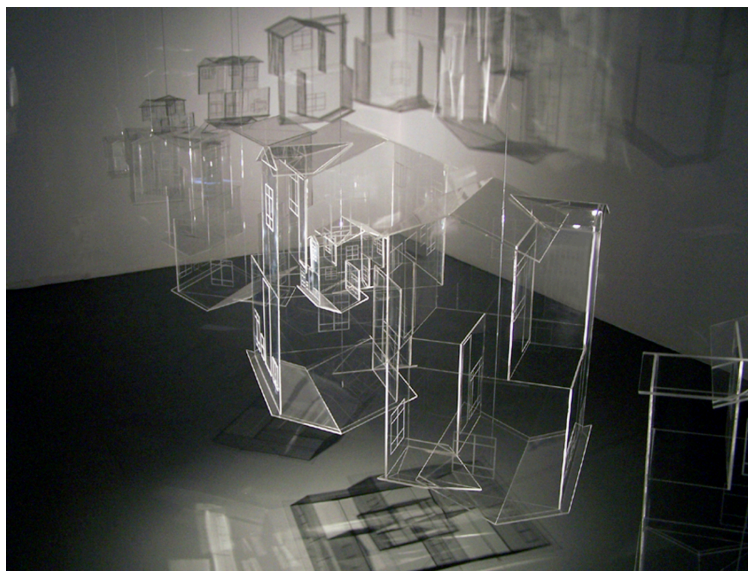


Figure 21 - *Ik ben zo blij dat ik hier ben*, Installation detail, Angela Femia 2007

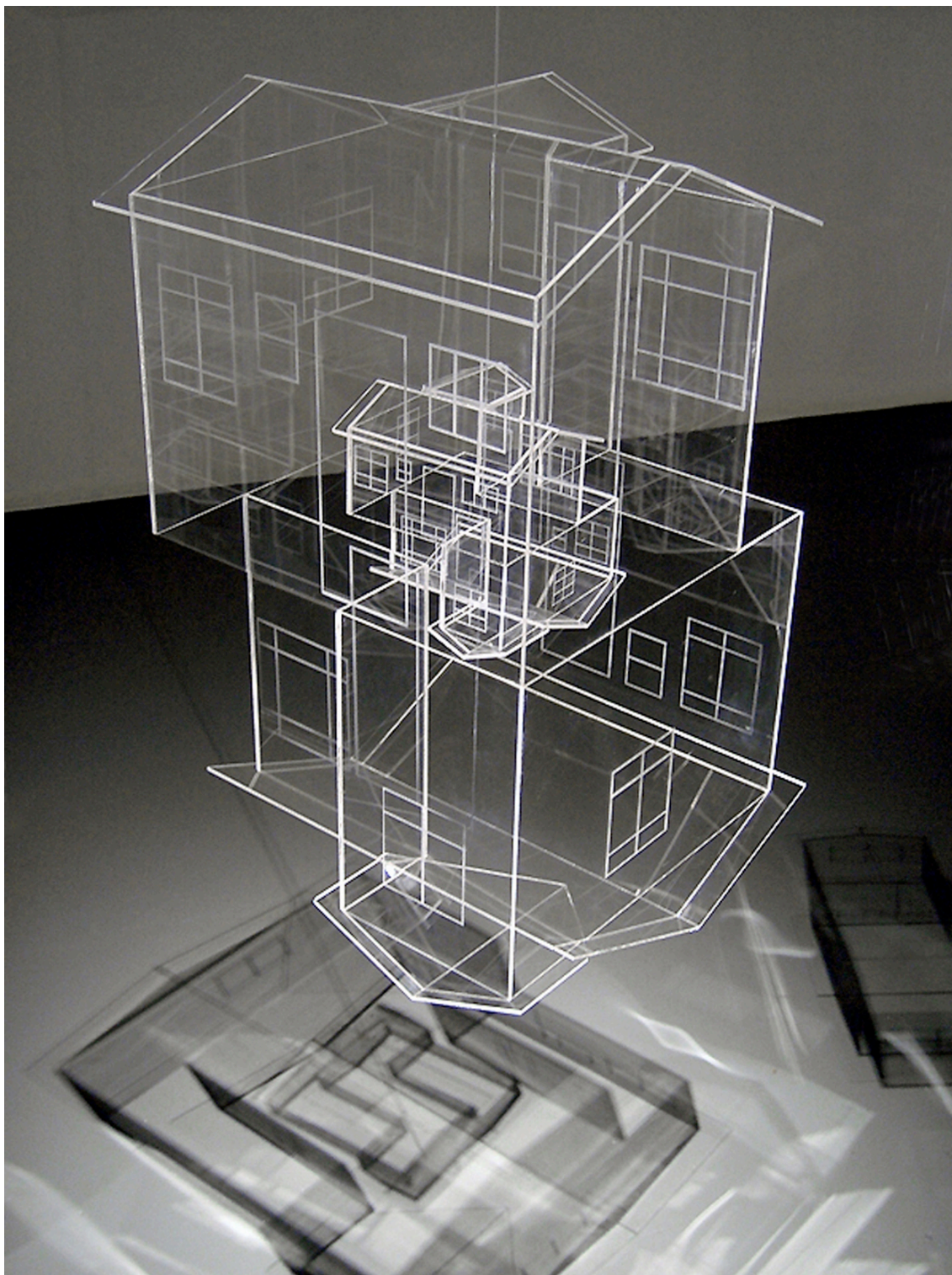


Figure 22 - *Ik ben zo blij dat ik hier ben*, Installation detail, Angela Femia 2007