

Every wall has two sides – reflections on neighbors and strangers

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*Drum practice*

I want to start with a story; it takes place in Southern California, in 1984, and the moment in early teenage life when I started playing drums. This occurred as a search for what I might call "self-determination", and like many teenagers, music functioned in support of this: to break away from the family, to deepen bonds with particular friends, namely Brian and Mark, who played guitar and bass; and to do so through the energetic and intensely pliable medium of sound.

So already the production of sound was about negotiating the space between different conditions of private and public life: between the privacy of the individual body, my singularity, and the publicness of family life; between the privacy of the band – what I may also call "the formation of a tribe" – and the publicity of school, and all the rather terrible relationships that comes with this. And I would say, even further, and especially: between the privacy of an idea or impulse, and the publicity of its expression.

Here, the idea is nothing absolutely nameable, but rather, the impulse toward creativity, toward the imagination, and toward other social formations – the essential desire for something else; and its expressions that amplify themselves into forms of publicness: the impulse which also contends with material, and through a range of activities forces contact with the real.

*The imagination and the real; the band and the family; the desire and the material.*

To come back to the drums, I would like to cite an example where privacy and publicity meet; it was not so long after starting to play drums that I experienced the appearance of the neighbor. Even though we lived in a house surrounded by quite a bit of lawn, trees, and a wall, one day I heard through my drumming the sound of someone banging on our door. Upon opening, it was our neighbor from next door, who was obviously agitated and annoyed; he told me that he was sick of hearing me play drums. At this moment, I was taken aback, as it was suddenly clear to me, that this sound I was producing could travel such distances, through a number of material obstructions, to finally end up in another's house. Interestingly enough, it was also the first time I had really confronted the neighbor, even though we had already lived in the house for over a year; so, there are a number of relationships that this encounter, this event sets up, which I want to use and to reflect upon in approaching the question of the home, the neighbor, the stranger, and the idea of shared space.

Essentially, I'm interested in considering the space of the home as vital to what Michael Warner terms "world making" – that the interiority of home-life may afford respite from the intensities of being outside, specifically by supporting a space of the imagination; this may also go the other way, that the intensities that may occur in the home, and in relation to family or neighbors, may encourage or demand escape routes that lead us outside, to form an alternative social structure. Whether as a safe haven,

or an unbearable situation, home-life is generative of the essential creativity needed for world making: for projecting outward, imaginatively, materially, socially.

Returning to my encounter with the neighbor, what this introduced to me was that the world making activity of drumming could only occur because of the safe haven of the home: that I was enabled to try something new, something so beyond my capacities, precisely because no one else could see me; and yet, such productions also leaked out of the home, without my realizing, to ultimately annoy the neighbor, introducing to me that profound lesson that privacy is often never so stable, clear, or in the end, private: that there was another, close by.

There is a lot to say about the specifics of this situation; and how the home is always contextualized within a certain class, economic, or social history. But for today, I want to extract some more general ideas and reflections, which might assist in approaching the specifics of particular homes and home-life.

In this sense, what I'm arriving at is the situation of a relationship, a rather charged dialogue that moves from a space of the domestic to that of the worldly; from singularity to publicity; and from desire to its material manifestations and which often spark a range of negotiations and challenges.

I'm interested to adopt the drum, and the activity of drumming, as a notion of architecture that, rather than withstand the confrontations between neighbors and strangers, conducts them: Can we envision an idea of shared space, while maintaining the safe haven of the interior? Can we give space for the production of a desiring activity, along with the confrontations these activities necessarily generate? And to do so in support of what I'd like to call "domestic practices": practices of care that are publicly minded?

### *Domestic practices*

Here I want to refer to the project developed by Casco in Utrecht and held between 2009-2012, The Grand Domestic Revolution. The project aimed to research the sphere of the domestic by inviting different artists and activists to rethink, deconstruct, and activate methods and practices of domestic life. Through this an array of expressions were materialized, each undoing and redoing what the domestic could be, architecturally, socially, privately, politically.

There's a lot to say about this project, but what I want to highlight is how the relation between reproduction and production gets articulated; the home traditionally being understood as the main site of labors of reproduction, of building home, and the worldly domain as the site of production (this brings us to an issue of sexuality and gender, which I will hold off for now, but which is equally important). Richard Sennett captures this division as a question of architecture, but also one of psychology (the two being deeply connected): that this division of reproduction and production creates a psychology that marks our feelings for interior and exterior; for folding inward or unfolding toward others; and between experiences of attachment and detachment: between latching onto, reproducing, caring, and separating, producing,

innovating. In short, we go in to find the familiar, and we go out to experience difference.

What I think has become clear, especially with the intensification of our networked and neoliberal conditions, is the collapse of these delineations or boundaries: reproduction and production equally occupy the home, and gestures of caretaking and home-building are equally displaced onto the sphere of public life through intense mobility and augmentation (we are so much more affectively related so much more involved in each other's lives); in this regard, I'm curious to ask: what types of architecture might this demand or inspire? Is there a new spatial language attached to the grand domestic revolution today, one that might interweave the reproductions of home life with the productions of worldliness, between the drumming teenager and the annoyed neighbor? And by extension, that can support forms of community, co-operation, and publicness that are equally about home, family, and the imagination? If housing is to remain public, might this require a new definition of what the public is? Is it possible to pay tax for the benefit of new domestic practices? Does not public housing, at least conceptually, already embody this construct, weaving public good with private life?

### *Domestic Imaginary*

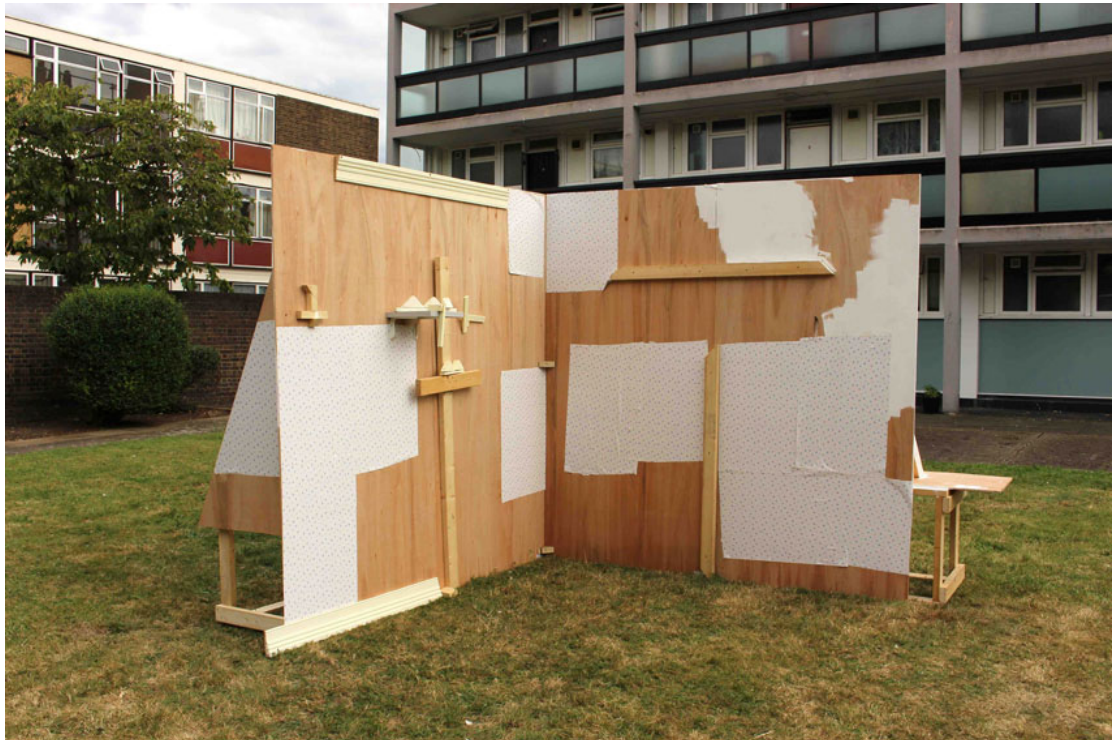
In July of this year, as part of a residency here at the Gallery, I was able to develop an event. This took place one weekend afternoon on the Elmington Estate, just up the road here, and was focused on a self-build, participatory action. The idea was to create a social situation, where visitors would contribute to the building of a structure, or what I called "a fragment": two walls joined together to form a corner. I was interested to literally expose the material elements of a single room – seeing this as a fundamental architectural structure necessary for inhabitation – as well as to expose an approach to construction: that the making of a room is in fact a gesture, or practice, open to everyone.

Locating this action on the Estate also contained the desire to question what constitutes domestic life, the home, and its architectures; to raise the issue as to the creative imaginings needed for making space, and especially to highlight this as a public activity: it was my hope that, in making such a fragment together, we might consider co-operation, sharing, know-how and the imagination as key to any formation of domestic life.

Through the afternoon, the walls did take shape, with the help of visitors, friends, strangers, neighbors and kids, facilitated by the Gallery and its team; in addition, I invited Paul Abbott, a London-based drummer, to make an intervention onto the situation: he positioned a drum set in the far corner of the site, and improvised according to the actions of the event, the gathering and construction of the walls. Here I wanted to locate the drummer, again, as an element within this scene of architecture and domestic life.



Already, we have a space: an inward, and an outward; a sense for interiority – of dwelling within – and exteriority – a looking out, a being on the other side. Even if the space remains open, merely a sketch, a diagram, a fragment: still, there are two sides, two faces, two psychologies, two emotional landscapes, and maybe even, two imaginings: that I go to one side for a certain feeling, a view, a thinking and doing, and the other, for something other.



What I want to highlight is the wall then not necessarily as a barrier, but as a surface of vibration, a conductor that enables a conversation to pass between or around inner and outer, domesticity and worldliness, dreams and work.

Is it possible to imagine an architecture that assembles the nurturing of a private life with the strangeness of what it connects to? That even celebrates how privacy is more public than we often realize? And that constructs a common good according to the fantasies of a domestic imaginary?

### *Domestic sociability*

This leads me to the themes of the neighbor and the stranger, and how these two figures are increasingly unsettled, or unfixed as identities. While we may understand the neighbor as a domestic figure that lives close by, that is proximate and recognizable, and the stranger as a figure of the world, that is unknown to me, and rather anonymous – it's interesting to identify a shift in today's global landscape: is not the stranger increasingly proximate? Is not the worldliness of the unknown increasingly participating within domestic space? How quickly the stranger takes up the position of the neighbor, as someone recognizable?

(Here I might make a quick reference to the community of Airbnb: we might see in this a symptom of that greater movement, where the categories of privacy and publicity are shuffled, and strangers and neighbors come to continually meet.)

I find this extremely interesting, and suggestive, for rethinking a model of shared space. Michael Warner, in his book on publics and counter-publics, highlights how the stranger participates within public life by appearing on the horizon, as a figure that participates as a potential: the stranger is someone to the side of an identifiable public group, and that nonetheless is addressed in public discourse. Warner terms this "stranger sociability". That I speak, addressing a crowd, for instance here, and in doing so create a public forum, which consists of some people I may know, and some that I may not; and yet in this moment, I am always speaking a bit beyond what I know – I attempt to address, and to share with everyone, and my words are made with the stranger in mind.

The stranger, in this sense, is an important figure, for he or she is a catalyst for new forms of speech; I must imagine and reach toward the someone that may not know who I am, or what I'm speaking of; in short, I *reach* for the stranger.

I'd like to use "stranger sociability" as an idea for approaching the domestic today, to recognize how neighbors and strangers may have a certain fixity, but at the same time, may find sudden opportunities for association and solidarity. Here, the notion of community must certainly shift, to recognize the intensely unsettled and unsettling conditions of global life, and capital, which may also produce new openings for collectivity, sharing, togetherness, care and concern. This is precisely what I've experienced being in London, and getting into this project: as an outsider, I'm astounded at the level of charged debate, political battling, social concern, and the narratives that twine themselves around the issue of social housing; and that also lead to new formations of public life, commoning, self-organization, and alternative

thinking. This might be the flipside to the dismantling of state welfare: that in that gap, we are certainly forced into what I might see as an intensely creative and domestic approach toward worldliness: caring for resources, and each other, extending compassion beyond the immediate, which radically shifts the dichotomy between neighbors and strangers, interiority and exteriority, reproduction and production.

### *Domestic resistance*

I'd like to end by referencing two projects, each of which focuses on the home as a site for generating and supporting social encounters, as well as for critically reflecting upon the importance and politics of domestic space.

The first is the Hull House in Chicago, and the second, is Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead Project. To put these two projects together, of course, may seem rather ironic, but I'm serious in terms of recognizing each as an expression of domestic practices that seek out a more nuanced relation between public good and home life.

Hull House was established as one of the first settlement houses in the United States at the end of the 19th century, based on Toynbee Hall here in London. Initiated by Jane Addams and Ellen Starr, the House played an important role in changing the conditions of the poor and immigrant communities in Chicago by creating a safe haven for gathering; single mothers, out of work fathers, poor kids, lost or abandoned, and the newly arrived, all found a home at Hull House.

What I also find so interesting about the project, is the way in which the House developed over the years into a complex of 13 buildings, each built for specific activities, or around specific groups. This included a Dining Hall, a Women's House, a Boy's House, a theater, spaces for workshops on art and music, cooking and sewing, English language classes, as well as classes on law and American government; guests regularly appeared from local Universities, to lecture and to share in the exchange of knowledge.

Hull House gives a strong expression of domestic practice, and housing, which changes the focus from worldly production to domestic production, and which has a dramatic impact on relations between neighbors and strangers (not to mention, between gender and class relations). Hull House functioned as a contact zone where residents from different communities could meet, children could play and work together, and women and single mothers, in particular, could find support (as well as take an extremely active role in city policy making).

This finds another type of expression in the project of artist Mike Kelley, Mobile Homestead. Kelley's work generally concentrates on the libidinal drives that often remain out of view but which occupy our central activities: stuffed animals, comics, punk music, and the vernaculars of American culture all perform in his work, to de-sublimate the normative appearances of things. Mobile Homestead is an interesting shift in Kelley's work, as it's one of his only "public projects" which gives space for other communities and projects. Built as a replica of his childhood home in Detroit, Michigan, Mobile Homestead is a mobile structure, moving from place to place, and

acting as a stage for other artistic and community initiatives. It is essentially a platform for local groups and neighborhood projects, that as Kelley suggests, may also act as a critical trigger for *disturbing* the neighborhood: he thinks of it as a type of trickster designed to support sub-cultural expressions, as well as withdrawal and private behavior: as part of the structure, there is a permanent foundation located outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit; this foundation is actually a subterranean level consisting of separate rooms, more like a labyrinth off-limits to the general public, but available for particular projects; like a private clubhouse, the basement levels literally support other types of domestic practices, for instance, band practice.

What Kelley's project highlights is the home as a space of psychological and emotional intensity; while it appears as a "normal" structure, Kelley opens his home to uncanny occupations: he literally invites strangers into his house, creating new formations of neighborliness, in which culture and sub-culture, may conjoin into unexpected communities. As Kelley states: "Rather than projecting ideas out into the world, Mobile Homestead has been set up to invite the community's ideas in."

What Hull House and Mobile Homestead highlight, and which I want to capture here, is the formation of domestic practices that are equally about private fantasy, imagination, care, and reproduction as well as public good, community, production and resistance; and that the wall which so often divides may also conduct forms of exposure that are equally nurturing.