

Acconci. Jan 1988
 PROJECTIONS OF HOME

1.

The beginning of John Ford's THE SEARCHERS: after title and credits on brick, there's a black ground for white text: 'Texas 1868' -- the text fades out, the screen is black for another instant until, suddenly, there's a cut inside the black ground, the black ground begins to open from the inside, a vertical rectangle in the middle of the horizontal screen, a landscape seen through the rectangle -- moving into the opening, a woman stands with her back to the camera, her back to us -- she's at a doorway, the opening in the black was the opening of a door, the black is the inside of the house, which is dark except for the light of the landscape in the doorway, through which we watch John Wayne approaching on horseback -- we're behind the woman, we're the males on her back, we'll know her secrets, we're in the dark of a private house, a dark that stretches to become the vast dark of a public house that tries to be both public and private at once by keeping the darkness of privacy, we're in the darkness of a movie theater.

Go through the plot quickly: while the outsider/guardian John Wayne is called away, the house is attacked, the parents are killed, the daughters are kidnapped -- Wayne goes out to bring them back.

Two hours later, years later, after the search is over and the movie is about to end, we're in front of the same black ground, the same hole into the landscape. It's a different house, but no matter; the inside is just as black, the comforts of one home are replaceable with the comforts of another. The family comes back in: first the lost girl who has lived with Indians/aliens, she comes in with the people who will be her new parents now that she's white again -- John Wayne, then, is about to come in, but he steps out of the way to allow a newly-formed couple to enter (this is a necessary couple, because the male member is a half-breed, who has to be integrated) -- they've all come in now but Wayne, he's alone, the others have forgotten about him, he puts one foot on the threshold but he can't come in, he turns around and goes back out, the door closes, the screen is black, the movie is over.

One second thought as we're leaving the theater: when the family steamed in, they didn't come directly toward us, they came in askew, to our right, they disappeared off-screen not into us but off to our side. So we're not them; we're in the house but outside it, able to see it at the same time -- though we might be family, we have the mobility of a John Wayne, we have a choice of either role. (After all, the inside of the house is dark, so dark: if we choose to have its comforts, we have to take the abyss along with it.)

2.

The American (male) myth demands the building of the home; but it demands also the outsider who comes and goes as he pleases, who can't go home again. The American male is divided into two parts, both seen in terms of the function of building. One part, one role, is that of the husband/father who, as a by-product, builds a house for self and family; this act of building comes out of his essence, out of his name, this is an act of building-from-within. Once the house is built, the husband/father can take it for granted and turn to the people inside. For that house to be preserved, then, or for that house once it is destroyed to be rebuilt, requires an act of building from outside, an act that comes not from necessity and fact but out of will and abstraction. The other American-male role, then, is that of the architect: his desire is not to build a house for himself and his own but, instead, to build any house, to build all houses. In so doing, the American-architect subverts the role of the American husband/father, who is seen as a sissy, a stay-at-home. The American architect's mission is to build a home for others, a home for women, a prison for women. Once the woman is brought home, the American-architect part of the male is allowed to go back out and hunt for more and put them in place, the places that he will build. The American-architect part of the male is allowed to go out and be, at one time in history, a pioneer and, at another time, a swinging single.

3.

Sooner or later the child has to leave the home. The way to leave that home is through sex: sex means leaving the home, leaving the family. But, whereas the European home is embedded in the ground, embedded in the past, the American home is built on top of the ground, a house without a basement, a house without a history of its own, a house that can only put on the faces of different styles imported from the lands of various ancestors. The American house has a tenuous existence; the American fear is: if you leave the house, the house might disappear into thin air. So the American is in a double-bind in order to save the house, the American has to stay at home -- but, in order to save the self, in order to grow up, the American has to leave home. The resolution of this contradiction is incest; incest is sex without having to leave the home. The American version of incest (Melville, Faulkner) is restricted to brother-sister; mother-son sex, or father-daughter sex, would be confirming the home too completely, would be providing a closure, would be pinning the male down so that he can never get up again. Mother-son and father-daughter sex would satisfy the need to maintain the home by staying at home; but it would deny the male-myth need to be outside. Brother-sister sex, on the other hand, keeps the show on the road: it allows the children to leave the home as they have to, in order to grow up, while all ~~the~~ the while carrying their own home with them (in the form of each other) as they go. Brother-sister sex is the prototype of the American mobile home.

One note of warning. Brother-sister sex, while granting theoretically

mobility to both parties, is a fantasy or a privilege ~~mobility~~ be restricted to males since, in the end, it restricts the female: though the sister, by choosing the brother, is in the act of rebelling against the father, who she has rejected in favor of the brother, sooner or later she will probably see that brother as the spitting-image of the father, so she's been subjugated to that father all along. If the woman stays at home as daughter, inside the fixed home, she's stuck; if she moves away as sister, inside the mobile home, she's carried.

4.

Let me tell you a story; more precisely, let me tell you about a dream, a dream from sometime in the mid-70's. There's a large set of steps, stone steps, so long you can't see the ends of them, steps of grandeur, steps as if up to a palace, the steps of a C.B. DeMille movie. The dream is shot in long-shot, but at the same time as I'm seeing the scene from afar I'm shoved right into the middle of it, I'm climbing up the steps. I'm struggling up the steps: at each step there's a small band of toy soldiers fighting to stop me, to keep me down -- they're tiny toy soldiers (this is how I see it in long-shot), but each of them has the strength of ten men (this is how I feel it in close-up). Okay; they're strong; but I'm winning anyway, at each step I make my way through them, I push the soldiers away and climb higher. When I push each soldier off me, the soldier falls -- now there's a definite cut from close-up to long-shot, I see the steps in side-elevation, the toy soldier (small and barely visible in relation to the steps) falls in a slow graceful arc (the arc is visible) ~~away from the steps~~ off the steps, the arc has the sound of wind inside a room. Finally, exhausted, I reach the top. The top is an empty plain, the vast ground is gray and concrete-like but probably natural, the sky is white. Standing on the empty ground are three black-and-white photographs, aged photographs, hinged together, like pictures on top of a grandmother's fireplace but as large as a person, as large as me. Pictures of people larger than me, since they show only torso and face: a photo of Marx, a photo of Darwin, a photo of Wagner. The eyes of one of them (I can't remember which) turns to the others, like the eyes of a statue in a Cocteau movie, and that one says: "Isn't it absurd of Vito Acconci to spend all that time avoiding the House of Torment only to arrive here at the House of Torture?"

5.

A first-person narrative begins at home, comes out of the home. The reader, in the closure provided by the light that allows him/her to read (light/person/book forms a cocoon), either puts himself/herself in the first-person narrator's place (inside that narrator's house), or comes face-to-face with that narrator (as if part of a couple, as if in a marriage). A third-person narrator, on the other hand, allows the reader to travel: the reader views the persons and events in the narrative from afar, the reader skims over things without having to be embedded in them. The

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~~the~~ mystery novel is the exemplar of the first-person narrative: the talking detective talks himself (herself? usually not) into existence, goes on talking so that metaphor makes a place to put the self in, talks in circles so that a plot might thicken. The mystery novel never leaves home, goes down into the basement and finds the skeletons in the closet; the mystery novel goes from the present into the past. The science-fiction novel, on the other hand, is the exemplar of the third-person narrative: the narrator doesn't have a home, the narrator is only a visitor of foreign (alien) places -- places, things, and persons are seen at a distance as objects to be examined and studied. This laboratory-like observation allows for the free-play of re-mixture and re-organization; committed to no home and no family and no love, the third-person narrator goes from the present into the future.

6.

Before I did work in an art context, I was writing poetry. My first pieces, in an art-context, were activities in the street; this excursion into the street could be seen as an attempt ~~to~~ ~~to~~ to leave home, a home shaped by the contact of writing-person and desk-top, through means of paper and pen and defined by the boundaries of light. The sheet of paper, looked down at on a desk, was analagous to the plan-view of a house; going out into the street was a way of literally breaking the margins, breaking out of the house and leaving the paper behind. After a few months of doing street pieces, however, I started doing pieces with my own body: I concentrated on myself, I worked on my own person. It was as if I had left home too quickly, as if I was afraid I would be lost out in the streets: I had to come back home -- whatever work I would do in an art-context had to begin ~~with~~ with what I could assume I knew at least something about (had to begin with my own body, had to begin at home).

7.

My generation of artists re-instituted an age of promiscuity: we used whatever materials were conveniently available, we switched media at will, we worked on the spot in different and specific sites. The re-emergence of painting, after the mid-70's, represented and confirmed a return to monogamy. Painting was a last gasp of the self, a last-ditch attempt to believe in the existence of the self, a self that then could commit itself to things (consistent materials) and other selves (persons who would take the time to stand in front of a painting, ~~the~~ the time to mentally go through the painting). Painting was a way to connect yourself with what you were doing (inevitably, the person who painted would get some paint on himself/herself as he/she painted -- it was like the sperm that consummated a marriage contract); once you and yours were connected you were out of the reach of others -- once the painting was hung in a gallery or museum, it couldn't be touched. What painting did for the rest of us, who didn't paint, was to provide a scare, or at least a reminder, a

reminder analagous to Pascal's wager: we might not believe that the self existed, but what if it did? -- if it did we had a lot to lose, we'd lose the self we didn't even know we had -- so we might as well act as if we believed that the self existed -- in order to prove, to ourselves and to others, that we believed, we would make ourselves faithful to something or someone.

8.

The home is made up of talk; the foundation and maintenance of the home depends on a group of people each of whom believes in a self that is expressed by voice and that can be combined and re-combined with other selves. The home survives on a mixture of voices, each of which can be heard and responded to by other people in the home who, once they hear, know they are not alone in the house. The people in a house drive themselves into a corner that they can then call home. Family talk can't be allowed out of the house; if a voice is thrown, outside the walls, the family becomes confused, it no longer knows where it is, the home opens out into the street and becomes confused with the street. Considered from the outside, then, the house that remains a home keeps silent. If an outsider hears a voice from inside the house, the home is made all too familiar, all too human, the outsider who overhears recognizes the owner of the voice as one of his/her own kind, the outsider feels at home and has a way in, the barriers of the home are broken. Considered from the outside, the house that remains a home should only be seen and not heard, should only be seen and therefore desired. Whereas the house talks within, it writes without: the house puts a sign up outside to show off its public image. This writing, is public and can be shared with outsiders as much as the talk inside is private and can't be. But the house as writing presents itself as a page, a wall, a flat plane that acts as armor; talk, on the other hand, would have ~~had~~ had no boundaries, talk would have come from within each speaker, leading the outsider inside the body of each member of the home -- once the house talks, it's opened inside-out.

9.

Some recent public places, sometimes called 'art,' look like houses; but they don't have all the functional parts of a house (plumbing, etc.) or, if they do, they might have the appearance of private houses while being publicly owned and available for public use. These are houses meant not so much to live in as to pass through. Some of us who make these places choose the house as a prototype because it ties in with people's common knowledge and ordinary usage; since the house can be assumed as a place to be in, and not be met with resistance as 'art,' it can be used, as a matter of course, ~~as an occasion for social interaction and cultural reconsideration.~~ as an occasion for social interaction and cultural reconsideration. This dependence on the form of the house, however, might betray, on the part of the

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art-doer, a withdrawal to privacy in the middle of what's meant to be a public realm. The art-doer's construction of a house reveals a desire to domesticate the environment: the world will be filled with tiny houses, even when those houses aren't needed to live in -- the implication is that the public realm is too large to put your finger on, the flaws in a social/economic/political system are out of the control of people, the only thing to do is to give up and go back home. What might be seen as retreat, on the other hand, might actually be a re-attack, through a collision of conventions. Our insistence on the form of the house might be a way to insert, inside the public realm (the world of court-house

and town-square, a world that has been considered by convention to belong to the male) -- to insert within that male domain a region that has been considered by convention to be female (think of the wife/mother in Joe Dante's GREMLINS who attacks the little monster while shouting, "Get out of my kitchen!"). The sprouting of tiny multi-use houses all over public space is the introduction of intimate distance into a world where only public and social distances usually apply; this emergence of houses (make-believe houses, half-houses, substitute houses) is like fucking in the streets, like an orgy in the middle of a town-meeting. Inside the house are corridors and basements, places where secrets can fester and bombs are planted.

10.

You read the book before going to sleep, then you turn out the light; the lights go out -- we're in a different room now, not a bedroom but a theater -- and the movie begins. The book, enclosed within its covers, is like a house; the reader can open the book, open the house into rooms, but can only look on those rooms from the outside, as if looking down at a model. The movie is on the wall, is like the wall of a house that, in turn, shows the projection of a landscape; the viewer can't get through the wall, can only stand outside and look, as if the wall is a picture-window -- the viewer can't travel through the landscape, can only look at it off in the distance, as if looking at a billboard. The book is written in a language that everybody knows, everybody shares, but the book can be read only by one person at a time. The movie theater is a public place, but the place is dark, the dark a person is in while asleep, the viewer sleeps in public. The book is, physically, smaller than life; the movie is too large for life. The book and the movie provide a theory, a scenario, and an image of public action; but the closure of the book within its covers, the confinement of the movie to the wall, the privacy of the movie-viewing and the book-reading experiences -- all this contradicts public action, stops public action before it can begin, puts public action off to an unspecified future. Public art, architecture, public action, feed off the influence of books and movies; but as long as you can't put the book down, as long as you see the movie again and again, the book and the movie function as surrogates, making behavior in public unnecessary. Only when the book is closed, only when the movie is over, can public-art/architecture/public-action begin. The goal of public-art/architecture/public-action might be: to obviate the need for books and movies, to include what used to be the experience of books and movies within the experience of public space, to nurture beings who live out books and movies of their own, on their own, and with each other.

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