

FRANCES STARK

COLLECTED WRITING: 1993-2003

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The Architect & The Housewife

on Michael Lin

In Los Angeles, in the spring, at a table, on the beach, Michael Lin told me about his last project *Interior* and showed me his plans for *Complementary*. We spoke of his interests in pursuing a dialogue between the public space of the exhibition and the private space of the domestic interior. He told me the project, *Complementary*, was to culminate in book form. If I wanted, I could contribute some text. Then and there I had a heading in my head, a heading in my head not altogether un-complementary in and of itself, under which a textual exploration of *Complementary* might fall. In Taipei, in summer, at a table, under some air conditioning, the heading that was in my head is going from my head now to the paper, towards that aforementioned book, which I have to assume you are now holding, in which case you are also about to encounter, below, the heading mentioned above, beneath which you will not find an analysis or interpretation of Michael Lin's *Complementary*. Instead you'll find my monologue, my contribution to the dialogue. But briefly, before I begin, I'm just going to pull a quote from a book I found lying on Michael Lin's desk. The book is by Oscar Wilde and it's called *The Critic as Artist*. I opened it up because on the cover, in addition to the title, it said: with some remarks on the importance of doing nothing and discussing everything, and my eyes landed on the following sentence: 'If you wish to understand others you must intensify your own individualism.'

The Architect & The Housewife

I have had complaints about my couch, which bisects my living room diagonally, orienting the viewer towards a rather delightful view overlooking the city and its backdrop of hills, behind which the sun can be seen disappearing nightly. Although not lacking a handful of admirers, the couch seems to provide inadequate comfort to most visitors. Either they say so directly, or, more often express their discomfort silently by choosing to make themselves comfortable at the kitchen table in the adjoining room, from which you only have a view of purple and pink flowers. The couch is a Danish Modern design, smaller than your average couch, with quite thin square cushions, extremely

attractive actually. However, I don't think the design is the problem. The problem, rather, lies in the fact that directly behind the couch, meaning directly behind the head of anyone sitting on the couch, is my desk. It's technically just a table, a long one, slightly longer than the couch and only an inch or so taller than the top of the couch. The large rectangular surface of the desk is covered in that dark chocolatey brown, fake wood veneer. Its edges are curved, lined with dark brown plastic trim about an inch thick. Its base, collapsible if necessary, is made of thin cheap metal, painted, of course, dark brown. Usually the entire surface of the desk is covered – my computer, loose papers, books and stacks of this and that. So, not only is it just a desk behind the seated person's head, but an unruly mess made up of stacks of loose papers that can and do easily stray from the boundary of the table-desk toward the head and shoulders of a seated guest. It's a mess because it lacks any of the simple and ingenious design conveniences which might usually be incorporated into a well-made desk in order to keep papers and various other desk-dwelling items under control. I failed to mention that the table/desk lies flush with the back of the couch diagonally bisecting my living room in order to leave all possible wall space open. I use the desk for writing and the walls for making drawings, which I may as well tell you, are made up of writing. So you see this curious arrangement (of my couch and my desk, not my writing and my writing-drawing) is predicated on the fact that not only is my living room my living room but my living room also serves as my studio.

The dilemma of having a couch in my studio is perhaps an interesting one. If I can't get sufficiently engaged in a book, or making a drawing, I might end up staring into space. You can't stare into space forever, so I might start to look around and begin thinking to myself, this house is too messy or not nice looking enough or those drawers should be cleaned out or perhaps if I got a different piece of furniture for over there I could rearrange this here and my life would run more smoothly. I am sparing you the details of my toil which aspires to productivity; suffice it to say it's not hard not to experience,

on a regular basis, the loneliness, the anxiety, the constant urge to redecorate I imagined a housewife might feel.

The possibility of becoming an active consumer can drive me out of the house – once entering Ikea, or even Office Depot – wherever – the world opens up in terms of what me and my home, office, studio can become. On two separate occasions I bought a pillow from a chain store called The Pottery Barn. Both times I resented the homogeneity of the store, but both times I thought to myself 'My head deserves the luxury this pillow has to offer.' The first pillow purchase actually can be broken down into two parts. Part one is I simply bought a pillow without a case at Ikea, the first throw-pillow I ever bought in my life, by the way. In the do-it-yourself spirit of Ikea, I planned to sew my own case out of something special. I don't really sew, but it seemed simple enough. Several weeks passed without me sewing a case. One day my father and baby brother drove into town. We planned to drive to the museum where one of my drawings happened to be hanging in an exhibition. We got in the car to go there but first we needed to eat. In our search for a meal we could all agree on we got completely off track and far from the museum. By the time we finished eating it was quite late and we were running out of time, and because adult things are harder to do with a six year old in tow, we ended up at the mall across the street instead of the museum. That is where the first shop that sucked me in spit me back out again with a baby blue angora pillow case. That was part two of pillow purchase number one.

Pillow purchase number two is like this. I was feeling heartbroken and unable to work. My friend Laura, a painter, learned of my useless condition and decided I needed escape. She drove me to a heavily populated shopping area. We walked into a series of stores that sold housewares and took turns interpreting the merchandise. We ended up at The Pottery Barn and she bought a variety of blue floral pillows in different sizes whereas I selected a large summery two-tone green silk. But this second trip to The Pottery Barn, with another woman artist instead

of my father, coincided with the moment at which I recognized there was a novice homemaker-cum-consumer in me that was eager to get out and find a rug, an inoffensively scented candle or a pillow at precisely the time I should be sitting at the chocolatey fake wood table pushing through a difficult piece of work.

The kind of anxiety associated with working alone in a domestic environment is precisely what brought the housewife to mind. I have sometimes found myself envying a male friend, here or there, who happened to be engaged in large-scale art projects, out in the open air, or inside institutions with many people running around to ensure an imminent production. Was I not like a housewife, toiling within the confines of my home and serving as both hostess and docent of my tiny quarters? Were these men not like architects in that they were constantly carrying out plans – giving instructions, making constructions?

The impetus behind these categorizations had a little bit to do with the idea of couples. I knew of some couples in the art world where the female part of the couple happened to be engaged in works that were more studio oriented, in that they were either paintings or some other type of practice which typically has to be carried out alone in the studio whereas their partners were involved in projects that were sculpture-oriented and employed many more people in their realization. I thought about the studio works and how their viewing demanded a certain kind of intimacy and physical proximity to the viewer and how the men were making work that – although in some cases dealing explicitly with issues of domesticity – surrounded a viewer, was public, or involved some kind of environment or activity that accommodated more people at one time than could stand in front of a painting or read a tiny text in a drawing on the wall. It wasn't that the females weren't getting enough attention as the men, it was just a difference which made me consider whether or not I was somehow involved in an extremely conservative, not to mention lonely, practice. The painter Laura and I decided to pursue this extreme binary of the architect and the housewife as a way of reflecting on and examining current

art practices around us. This construction, as simplistic and reductive as it might sound, started to prove effective. In fact more than just elucidating differences in interior versus exterior sites of production, we began to consider whether 'interiority' and 'exteriority' were types of meaning-production as well, interiority evoking more of a Romantic tradition and exteriority being perhaps more in line with the avant-garde. Maybe, maybe not. I can imagine *The Architect & The Housewife* as a heading over almost any discussion regarding post-studio art practices which focus on decorative and design issues, whether in a public or private space. I can imagine its applicability to those works which seek to examine or at least evoke modernism's failures or successes, its utopian designs-for-living, or to those works which rely heavily on a public setting or large quantities of institutional commerce to bring the final product, object, and/or site into being, and last but not least those practices which seemingly overlook their complex reliance on the architecture and structure of the 'art world', still insisting that the handmade portable object is capable of producing meaning within its limited frame.

But first, back to basics. I presume a housewife is someone who will stay and maintain the home, decorate, arrange, re-arrange, prepare, wash, put things away, bring them out again – the house not being a site of accumulating production but a site of a series of simultaneous productions which bear no evidence of productivity – save for the fact that the home isn't falling apart. A supposedly good housewife maintains a busy environment which should appear as if nothing has ever happened. Nothing is being built per se. The architect, on the other hand, solves problems the public doesn't think about but which affect their consciousness of the environment, from things as essential as material, lighting and scale to more socially articulated needs like safety, cost, codes et cetera.

The exteriority I have so far mentally ascribed to 'the architect' has to do with elaborate extensions, disruptions and transformations into and of material reality. And, by extension, the act of writing, with a special emphasis on

fiction, seems to demand very little in terms of outside space – no commerce, a budget of mostly just living expenses, minimal materials – not much of a production. The production doesn't extend into or employ much of the exterior environment. Publication and distribution are different matters entirely since the formal completion of the work of fiction does not depend on the realization of either. However in the case of this writing here I wanted to break out of the confines of a personal interior and experience Taiwan. Flying halfway around the world to look at an exhibition and make a short piece of writing, for which I would receive a small payment, is a way for me, personally, to upset my imaginary position in my binary configuration. Recall the famous piece of writing by Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. This text, written in 1928, was meant to address the slippery topic of women and fiction. In it she writes: 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.' Isn't she suggesting that a main prerequisite to productivity is privacy? A woman, if she is occupying and/or upkeeping everyone else's rooms is going to have a difficult time getting any work done. Sure, she can enjoy many other 'rooms', consuming culture with the best of men, but when it comes to producing culture it might not only be a question of where she will do it but also a question of where you will consume it. Think of literature as an interior event, the mind or imagination being the place where the text unfolds. And consider the interior of the head – the particular bodily limits of your own perception and yet the seeming limitlessness of thought.

Now think of the interior of a home, to which a housewife has historically been expected to attend. Traditionally it is meant to provide her partner with a restorative and pleasant atmosphere so that he can continue his hard work in the public sector. Here I am talking about European bourgeois society around the turn of the century at which time something called 'Nuerasthenia' was a common form of nervous exhaustion thought to be brought about by excessive use of the brain. Businessmen were advised to temper their nuerasthenia by

going home to a completely soothing environment. Patterns found in decorative art objects which adorned the home were meant to offer repose in the domestic setting.

The function of décor is not to arouse particular emotions, but to give the milieu a character in accord with the man who must live there, without compelling his thoughts to focus on the image of a concrete reality, without forcing them to be objective when the hour of subjective refuge awaits him.

(From an article entitled 'The Interior' from the journal, *L'Art décoratif*, 1901)

Consider now the boundaries of the studio – not a home and not just a room. I came across a particularly striking phrase of Daniel Buren's in an essay he had written for *October* magazine in 1971 called 'The Function of the Studio.' Here is Buren's phrase, his heading: 'the unspeakable compromise of the portable work of art.' The compromise Buren finds unacceptable is that if a work is produced in a studio it is automatically wedded to that space, it somehow lives perfectly in that space, yet its portability is some kind of breach in integrity, meaning that it compromises itself by having to leave its home and go to a supposedly neutral gallery or museum space. This is at once declaring that a work should completely take into account that the museum or gallery space is nowhere near neutral and that somehow if one denies the work's relation to its space, one is on some level choosing to ignore the values the museum/gallery architecture is ascribing to the work, and the work itself is simply a piece of merchandise that shuttles easily from the studio into the marketplace. By the time I came across this I had already been ruminating on Michael's pillows. It is interesting how the paintings of the pillows conjure up both the portability of painting as a practice, as well as the portability of the pillows themselves, a major contribution to their use value. Also *Complementary* exhibits a self-consciousness of its status as exhibition. Not only does its intervention into the architecture offer a better view of outside to its viewers, it allows for more natural light to be shed onto the work, and that view is made available to you now, seeing as how the show

documented itself. OK, so I have just put the ideology of institutional critique into a convenient nutshell, but let's put scholarship aside for the sake of letting Buren's 'unspeakable compromise' resonate poetically under my compromising heading – granted it's an extremely subtle poetic.

There are a few ways to read the word compromise, one being more drastic than the other. The drastic way, which is surely what he meant, is 'to make liable to suspicion, danger or disrepute.' But I also think of a compromise as simply a settling of differences – for instance, something a couple must do to stay a couple. I have learned that the fabric used and reproduced in *Complementary* is a fabric associated with the wedding night. So, as it turns out, there are couples all over the place here, and, with a title of a show that means 'offsetting mutual lacks', you can bet there's no way to have a hermetically sealed art discussion; there have to be men, women, unhappiness, happiness, weddings, divorces, and sex. I mean I won't explicitly discuss these things; I just don't want you to forget about the fact that a home is usually designed for a family which starts with a couple, which is usually made up of two people who at some time in their compromising and complementary relationship have rolled around naked together on some pillows or some equivalent thereof. That reminds me of something. Adolf Loos, the Austrian architect, famous for his manifesto against decor, once wrote 'All art is erotic.' He didn't mean it as a compliment. Sure this is seriously taken out of context, but wait.

The architect, R.M. Schindler, also Austrian, designed his own residence in Los Angeles to be occupied by two couples. He seemed to be aspiring to a different kind of domesticity. Each couple would have their own bedroom and places in the house in which they did their work and studies, with several common indoor/outdoor living areas. The house is too complicated to describe here in detail, but the pertinent part for our story is that the two couples did not end up occupying the place harmoniously and it ended up just being the home of Schindler and his wife, Pauline. Finally that couple, too, disintegrated.

They divided the house and lived there, separately, together. His wife began to hang wallpaper and install carpeting, decorating her part of the house exactly the way she wanted, and here I might add that pink was her favorite color. Her husband would draft her letters which went something along the lines of 'I am sure you are familiar with the reasoning for my choice of materials and that what you have done is completely incongruent with my design and destroys the integrity of the structure,' something along those lines, 'signed, R.M. Schindler, Architect.' So much for compromise.

Famous architects throughout history have also been known to design chairs. Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, Frank Gehry and so on, even Schindler. The specificity of the challenge lies in the intimacy with which a body is to interact with a chair, an intimacy far greater and literally more pressing than between a body and a building. Here there is a direct correlation with contemporary artists' desire to address private individual comfort from the standpoint of an extremely public and social oriented tradition. Domesticity, interior design, and private vs. public space surface as issues in the works of many young contemporary, internationally renowned artists (which might be squeezed into the 'architect' category), artists whose practices are in line with Daniel Buren's oppositional ideology. In a lot of instances the work directly involves seating: the upholstering of chairs, a pier on which to venture out, buy a pack of cigarettes, smoke and enjoy the view, a private island, the transformation of a public Donald Judd sculpture into a bench at which to sit with friends, drink alcohol and listen to music, a building turned into a lamp with a rug laid out in front of it. Some of these projects were taken from *The Sculpture Projects in Münster*, 1997, which culminated in a five-hundred and forty page catalogue of the exhibition. Interestingly enough, Daniel Buren not only participated in the project but contributed a manifesto-like text to the catalogue. I was reclining on a rug under a lamp next to a stack of art catalogues at Michael's house leafing through this gigantic catalogue thinking about how, despite the fact that Buren's critique

of the portable object is now pretty much the dominant ideology, there surely is no shortage of the most portable object of all time, the book, and here I refer specifically to the art catalogue, which ensures that a work – no matter how problematic or ephemeral, no matter how casual or whimsical – remains a work of art, and a portable one at that.

Another book I happened to find at Michael's house, aside from the Oscar Wilde one, is *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* by E.H. Gombrich. This book is so great I'm sad to have to go back to L.A. without it. Several days after picking up Wilde's *Artist as Critic* (which sort of gave me the go-ahead to be myself in this piece, so to speak) I started reading the Gombrich book. I couldn't believe its pertinence. Just that day I had come so close to buying a different book by Gombrich, my first one by the way, as with the Ikea throw pillow, but I decided, it'll be cheaper in the States. And now here was Gombrich again, this time tempting me to just copy half of his book by hand and put it in the catalogue instead of my own writing. And not only that. Right at a critical point where designers were considering themselves equals with painters, he quotes *The Critic as Artist*. Auspicious or what? 'The art that is frankly decorative is the art to live with. It is, for all visible arts, the one art that creates in us both mood and temperament. Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways. The harmony that resides in the delicate proportions of lines and masses becomes mirrored in the mind. The repetitions of patterns give us rest.'

Now bear with me, I am about to put that Loos business about all art being erotic into context for you. According to Gombrich 'the emancipation of pattern design into a dependent art with growing pretensions foreshadowed the divorce between decoration and functional fitness.' He quotes Loos, who vehemently requests the divorce, from his 1908 essay *Ornament und Verbrechen*. But before that he briefly points out that as early as 1892 the American architect, Louis Sullivan,

had written: 'it would be greatly for our aesthetic good if we should refrain entirely from the use of ornament for a period of years in order that our thoughts might concentrate acutely upon the production of buildings well formed and comely in the nude.' Here it sounds like Sullivan is only calling for a friendly separation instead of a divorce. And I know with Sullivan they get back together, and I know this because I know Sullivan was obsessed with decoration until his very old age because in fact I happen to have a tattoo of one of the drawings he made after he had stopped making buildings. So, you can imagine my excitement when I first read those few sentences heretofore left out from in front of 'All art is erotic': 'The man of this century who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate.... The urge to ornament one's face and everything within reach is the very origin of the visual arts. It is the babbling of painting.' According to Gombrich, abstraction in painting didn't occur until after this complicated and competitive intermingling of decorative art with high art. And speaking of babbling, I have babbled on long enough but I'd like to bring this full circle if I can, and bring your attention now to an image of a perfect couple, a perfect marriage, where the gesture of placing a pillow in just the right spot has made history.