

## THE UNEXPECTED POLITICS OF HANDS\*

In an open field, not very far from the centre of the city there is a house where somebody dwells on the limits of our notion of coexistence and habitability.

His house is a pure reflection of marginality and isolation; even so, it is his place, it is his house. Built with wooden boards awkwardly fixed without any sense of order, with pieces of plastic by way of roof, fixed to the ground with stones that miraculously keep this distorted shed together. This house does exist and I think I will not be able to forget it! The typical functions of the house were disorderly scattered around the shed: several chairs, a camping table, drying clothes, scattered food mixed up with a lot of garbage everywhere. An incredible image of a house! I do not know if it still stands together!

In that same place, close to the above-mentioned house, other constructions of the same type started to appear spontaneously. It was not planned but that free space in the city allowed these people some possibilities; let us say it was their only possibility!

I have also seen other houses of a much more solid construction: gypsies' settlements, districts of hovels with a certain degree of inner organisation, settled in those open spaces that the city does not occupy. These houses, despite their precariousness, better built, had a deeper foundation in the ground and their appearance of resistance was not only the result of the physicality of their construction but also of their strong personality, their brilliant entity.

Entire districts, peopled with hovels, which allowed themselves the use of a precise architectural adornment on the front porches of the houses, using brilliant painted colours or simply showing the colours of the most surprising and unexpected materials. Places that really attracted my attention. To me, real jewels that should have been protected and accepted as the most evident expression of one culture.

Those gypsy settlements, two of them to be precise, were destroyed by order of the local authorities and their inhabitants were taken away and re-accommodated in flats of conventional construction. To me, these hovels reflected a surprising affirmation of life: finally MARGINAL AREAS, GHETTOES.

## FREE SPACES, MARGINAL SPACES

In March 1998 I was invited to show my work in a collective exhibition in Barcelona.

For quite a long time, I had been considering the idea of building a house but it could never materialize because I never had the necessary requirements.

For this exhibition in Barcelona I finally decided to make "the house". Without a previous project, without preparatory sketches, just with the materials and the specific space I confronted what would later become my first CONSTRUCTION-HOUSE.

On a corner of the hall I closed a space of 5 mtrs. x 2.5 mtrs. x 2.5 mtrs. high with two simple walls made of cardboard and painted wooden planks. You could not enter the house; you could only look through one window and see the few things that there were inside: a cardboard foldaway bed, one bucket, papers and some oranges. That first work was titled "HUNGRY MARKET TOWN".

There was a substantial turn in my way of working since these houses brought forward the idea of the apparition of a "character" (the imaginary user of the house) within the margins of fiction. Without having completely abandoned or forgotten the process employed in the sculptural works previous to the houses, we may say that there was a clear "leap".

The sculptures which I made between 1995 and 1998 made reference to the domestic space, to the basic and primary functions of those people within the world of the house, which were noteworthy and important to me. Those works intended to reconstruct a personal forgotten memory, the recovery of a past, of a domestic landscape.

In 1995 and starting from scratch, thanks to Armando Montesinos's invitation to exhibit at the Galería Helga de Alvear, my process focused on trying to connect with a personal creative material, to define central points of interest. I started to work with my hands. Mitsuo Miura told me once: "One has to start to make art from what one knows". And I knew how to do something with my hands. Thus, I started to work with my hands, to fix my eye on my hands. Unexpectedly what sprang from there had to do with the world of the house, with the domestic and its relations.

Thus, the resultant sculptures suggested small landscapes created from everyday objects such as pieces of cloth, sticks, soap bars, glasses, etc. placed on or around furniture-objects or furniture-sculptures, attempting to suggest readings, scenes of the world of the objects within the house.

The following works (around September 1997) kept on delving deeply into this way by defining certain functions of everyday life with much more precision. You could find sculptures scattered on the floor ordering the traffic within the hall; as if the pieces had built invisible walls. Each one of the works

concretely defined one space and one function, for instance, a place for the food, a place for the water, a washing machine, small stages hanging from the wall, a place to carry, etc. Therefore I had already defined my first house not by building its walls but by suggesting the important or essential aspects to contain. We may say that I already had my house without having built it.

This '97 work was titled "GROUND WORKS" although it never appeared under such a title on the exhibition card.

The change brought about by the construction of the first house in Barcelona was the leap from a work that had constantly used memory to the field of fiction. In literary terms, and if the comparison holds, I had turned from writing biography to writing fiction, novels, fables. The houses I have been building in several places (both in inner and outer spaces) allowed the spectator the possibility to visit, touch, smell, have a seat, thoroughly watch the light, the atmosphere of a distant domestic universe, not belonging to our usual way of living, an invitation to the house of "an OTHER" really different from us. Poor, precarious, temporal houses but, even so, they showed a precise way of structuring their own reality: fictions of an undetermined world, free spaces, marginal spaces.

#### ONE SQUARE METRE OF GROUND IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

The American artist Gordon Matta-Clark engaged in searching and buying pieces of developing ground in the city of New York. Pieces of land that had no use between the built lots, scraps of ground without an owner, of such curious dimensions as one square metre or smaller ones, or elongated and narrow strips which were absolutely useless for construction purposes but, even so, for sale. Incredible but true! Certainly, I could not have built one of my houses on those scraps of land bought by Matta-Clark before a notary and with a legal contract of purchase. Paradoxical? No! Incoherent? Of course! Contradictory? No! It simply obeys to the logics of the sale.

When I set about building a house, wherever it is, my first impulso is to create a FREE SPACE, to liberate one space through that fiction, clearly linked to the reality of the hovels and the poor houses; I always try to fill them with the best possible atmosphere within their fiction (a fiction that springs from a very specific reality of construction), I try to harmonize them.

One can understand that the inhabitants of those houses still have enough access to their own personal or cultural surplus (despite the limitations) to generate a positive inhabitable space which preserves them from adverse conditions. By building the house over and over again, I find myself in the marginal space searching for its wished FREE space.

Jesús Palomino

\*The present text was written for the February 2001 exhibition at the Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid.