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Home Improvements

2016
How Did We Get Here?

A look at the work that didn’t make it into Zilka Gallery
“That their works were composed in chronological order, as artists from Brenton to Duchamp have noted, is no guarantee of their logical relationship in such a chronology. That they bear a superficial relationship to biographical event or events is, as Freud pointed out, often a ruse of narrative rather than an index of meaning. That they seem to operate according to rational laws of transformation and system is, finally, not a verification of their actual systematic contents.”

A raw feeling of resistance arises in me as I attempt to write a narrative for the process which led up to the creation of *Home Improvements*. To situate my work in a string of causalities seems to reduce it to its form as a story of self-made connections, to circumscribe its significance. I fear a result which is ignorant of its own projected presentation as a thing dominated by unspoken values, by the convention of thinking about the movement from one thing to another as continuous and progressive.

I am aware of the extent to which absence is a significant concept when thinking about the show. I think that part of this has to do with the nature of how it came to be, and the manner in which all of its previous iterations were so close to being in Zilka Gallery. I left a physical space for this work where inside of me their is the memory of unrealized, unfinished, even intangible projects.

It is possible, even likely, that in the future I might feel more comfortable saying which thing led to another, and why one project was more important the other one... At this moment I prefer to leave this endeavor at the stage of a list of separate projects and aims. This showcase of my past works is already a reduction of what *my past work* is. I recognize the importance of all of the work that did not make it into *Home Improvements* and its essential presence in the show. Hopefully this edit will inform your understanding of the meaning of *Home Improvements* as it is enhanced by knowledge of these past works.
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Mia Sister Girl, 2013, 36 Ridgebrook Drive, West Hartford, Connecticut
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Real Estate Fragments (and corresponding addresses), 2015, Archived sections of wall areas in mirrored reflections found in Real Estate Advertisements on realtor.com
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The Exhibition

A selection of photos of three pieces from *Home Improvements*
Zilka Gallery, Key (Metallic*), 2016.
Zilka Gallery, Key (Metallic*), 2016.
Zilka Gallery, Front: Mirror (Clear Blue Sky), 2016.
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Zilka Gallery, center: side view of Small Blue Frame (Audrey’s Auburn*), 2016.

*Parenthetical portion of titles are the names of paint colors used on pieces
The Essay
in parts; reflections

1
36 Ridgebrook Drive

“A House or a Home?” / “The Uncanny”
This past summer I was a boarder at the house I grew up in. I re-entered the space of my childhood home as a visitor and a spectator. My experience of dwelling was characterized by the uncanny feeling of an all too comfortable oscillation between familiarity and strangeness. My parents’ pending separation extracted the metaphor out of our house, and I watched as the fantasy of our family retroactively announced itself as a mutable object. Underneath the coated illusion of home-ness lies a matrix of blunt yet changeable material structures. As a witness to the changes of 36 Ridgebrook Drive, I re-imagined the household as a dually fascinating and terrifying thing to be inside of.
"Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich."

_Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”, 1919, (4)
The impetus for this project stems out of a relationship to the house as an object, both in the idea of a house as a whole or complete thing with its own reality, and the experience of the unfolding or unraveling of this idea in the encounter of the house as a fragmented system defined by its parts and particularity. This next section will explore the uncanny effect of these ideas as they are set in motion for the viewer of Home Improvements.

The Freudian concept of the uncanny can be understood through ones encounter with the familiar as it approaches or embodies the unfamiliar. In his 1919 essay on the subject, Sigmund Freud outlines the term as being of concern to the aesthetic realm. The quote which I included in the introduction to this paper establishes the linguistic connection between the familiar (heimlech) and the unfamiliar (unheimlech). In his paper, Freud explains the relationship of these words in multiple languages and concludes that in their German definitions, they are essentially equivalent. There are various ways of understanding the experience of these terms, the phenomena, in their equivalent state. What I have come to realize is that the defamiliarization of an object is a charged and unsettling process, a terrifying and fascinating thing.

I am most interested, at this juncture, in extent to which the a knowledge, as a definition of familiarity, plays a part in ones experience of the uncanny. Freud discusses Ernst Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny as that which is novel and unfamiliar:
“He ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always be that which one does not know where one is, as it were. The better oriented in his environment, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it.”

There is a way in which this definition of the uncanny functions quite well in an attempt to understand how this exhibition’s destabilizing effects are tied to a particular treatment of the known objects of the home.

The sculptures in Home Improvements present themselves as containing structures which are familiar. Not many are surprised by the presence of a wall, or a window—the show presents to its viewers objects which surround them daily. In

Zilka Gallery, 36 Ridgebrook Drive (Slate), 2016.

1 Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, 1919, p.2
this regard, the viewer knows of the things in the exhibition and they are more or less comfortable with there presence to the extent that they are decidedly familiar and not strange. When understood on the level of the individual objects which make up the show, Home Improvements references a world of familiar materials, shapes and structures. On another plane, however, the show presents these familiar objects in a manner which inherently results in the destabilization of their familiarity.

In order for the components of the exhibition to retain familiarity, there is a need for the viewer to establish some coherence, a coherence which is readily denied by their presentation. In the viewing of these familiar objects there is the urge to place them in the context which they are usually known—in the body of a house, a building, a whole object. To this effect the show capitalizes off of ones desire to maintain a knowing relationship with its objects in the combined offering up and rejection of familiarity. The uncanny feeling of the show becomes a product of the information which is withheld from the viewer, that which is unknown. To this effect Home Improvements is the direct testing of Jensch's definition, the feeling of the uncanny relies on knowledge and familiarity with its objects. Where there is a lack of information, there lies a feeling of the uncanniness.

Anthony Vidler’s The Architectural Uncanny opens with a chapter titled “Houses” in which he complicates the understanding that the uncanny arises out of a lack of information or familiarity with a thing. In the opening paragraphs he discusses a short story by Edgar Allen Poe which describes the uncanny as the result of an encounter with the familiar, the normal. In “House of Usher” Poe attempts to
understand the onset of terror in the presence of a familiar and mundane space. Poe’s narrator must reconcile his feelings of doom with the neutrality, even comfort, of his material surrounding. Vidler comments in the story saying that the slow realization that the sentiments of doom, “were properties of the house, embedded in the very stones that possessed a fatality in themselves, that the house was itself an uncanny power, came unwillingly, against all reason, the more disquieting for the absolute normality of the setting, its veritable absence of overt terror.”

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In the case of Poe’s poem the uncanny does not lie in the perception of the beholder, but rather in the object observed. One’s knowledge of an object suddenly has little to do with its uncanny effects.

Embedded in the memory of my own experience of uncanniness in my childhood home there is an acknowledgement of my house acting as something more than its observable structure. *Home Improvements* comments on this definition of the uncanny by treating the home as a series of objects. In my attempt to separate and individualize the parts of a house, I believe I am calling upon the gestalt properties of the home. The very structures within our walls elicit thoughts and impressions which cannot be explained in the words of perception—their material presence is more than the information they provide.

Zilka Gallery, Detail: Little Blue Frame (Audrey’s auburn*), 2016
2
Where Did Photography Go?

An ode to the forgotten medium
For the majority of this past year and during my career at Wesleyan as a Studio Arts major for that matter, photography dominated my artistic process. It was not until about two weeks before my thesis exhibition that I began a process of material construction, the result of which would fill Zilka Gallery as my completed senior thesis. The bulk of the show is a product of working with raw materials and a selection of objects over a period of 15 days. Although I put down the camera for this show’s making, its presence (and dominance) can still be read in an understanding the show as a discussion of signification.

The photographic medium is active in Home Improvements in the form of two specific references. The first has to do with an understanding of the index (as a type of sign) as it functions in photography and as talked about in Home Improvements. The second will address the presence of clear vinyl on all of the pieces in the show as both nodding to this first issue and also commenting on other aspects of the processes surrounding the making and viewing of a photographic object.
The Indexical Photograph

Key issues in Home Improvements are best understood in their application of a certain understanding of the index, an understanding which centers around a study of the photographic medium. Rosalind Krauss’ essay in two parts, Notes on The Index: Seventies Art in America, discusses the collective concern of the Index among what is understood as a decade of challengingly variant art. In the first part of her essay Krauss identifies what seems to me to be the crux of the import of the photographic medium, its capacity to serve as an empty index. Her essay discusses work by Marcel Duchamp, which “first establishes the connection between the index (as a type of sign) and the photograph.” For the sake of this essay I will only summarize her conclusions about the index and photography, and omit an account of these conclusion as seen in Duchamp’s work.

The photograph is, by the nature of its production, inherently indexical. Krauss writes,

“Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type icon, or visual likeness, which bears and indexical relationship to its object... Its power is as an index and its meaning resides in those modes of identification which are associated with the Imaginary.”

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4 ibid., 75.
The first conclusion of this quote can be traced back to notes on photography by the early 20th Century semiotician, Charles S. Pierce. "Photographs," Pierce says,

"especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects the represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs (indices), those by physical connection."\(^5\)

Krauss reiterates this key physical relationship and property of the index in photography as such:

"As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify."\(^6\)

There is a way in which this property of the photograph, in terms of its signifying power, relays primarily back to its process, the cause being the manner in which a photograph replicates the conditions of sight, the condition which establishes a physical connection between signifier and signified. Additionally, however, such an understanding allows us, as Krauss elaborates on, to define the index as a trace. She compares this to things like footsteps or a shadow,\(^7\) instilling the idea that the photograph refers to a process outside of itself. It is necessarily outside of time through

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\(^7\) ibid., p.75.
its referral to temporally defined processes. This condition allows for the index’s property (and the photograph’s property) as exhibiting an alienation from its object. This is where the second statement of the initial quotation from Krauss gains importance.

The photograph, in its indexical nature, activates what Lacan, in his theory the “mirror stage”, calls the Imaginary, the experience of attempting to come to closure with a self that is physically distant. In “Lacan’s terms, the Imaginary is the realm of fantasy, specified as a-temporal, because disengaged from the conditions of history”8 (where the symbolic takes place). While Lacan explains this phenomenon through the example of a child understanding himself as “I” and the image of himself in a reflection as “you”, the same arbitrary nature of signification (for pronouns in this case) can now be attributed to the photographic index. The emptiness of the signifier, and the necessary activation of the Imaginary for an encounter with the signified, is the very property of photograph which is of interest to me. The discontent between a trace (an indexical sign) and its cause is the empty space which can be both seen and thought about in *Home Improvements*.

The most obvious representation of this discussion of the index, and of photography on a more conventional plane, can be seen in the inclusion of empty picture frames in three of the sculptures in *Home Improvements*. These frames serve as placeholders for the traces of photographs. They are a display of empty indexes in a literal sense in that their lack of information has the capacity to call upon the nature of a photograph as a signifier alienated from its signification.

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8 ibid. p. 69.
There is a way in which the emptiness of the frames eludes to the emptiness of the space in the gallery. One reading places these absences in the context of home-ness, highlighting the exhibition’s rejection of this feeling and its lack of information about any particular home-ness. The emptiness of the frames comes to represent the atemporality of the objects in the show. They are traces of lack and they reference a process of filling, or a state of filled, where their contents are either torn from their frames, or they have yet to be filled.

The empty frames of *Home Improvements* are not only missing any two-dimensional contents, but also the walls on which such an object would lay against. The gesture of conflating the content of the frames with the wall itself does a number of important things. In Part 2 of Rosalind Krauss’ essay, she discusses the 1975 opening exhibition at P.S.1, where 75 artists executed installations showcasing the presence of the old building. Through her explication of the work, she argues that 1970s art can be understood through a new mode of considering the sign, one which is characterized by the reduction of the index to an empty trace. Krauss’ reading of Gordon Matta-Clark’s piece in the show, *Doors, Floors, Doors*, is of special help to understanding the significance of the use of frames in *Home Improvements*.

Krauss explains how Motta-Clarks cutting into the floors of the building is an act of cropping and a reference to that which is inherent in the photograph and furthermore presents the building as an uncoded, empty trace of some past process, or presence. “The procedure of excavation” Krauss says, “succeeds therefore in bringing the building into the
consciousness of the viewer in the form of a ghost." Home Improvements integrates this sentiment in the instance of the frames, as well as in the dominating sense of absence which exists in the space between each piece. In the case of the frames, I perhaps accomplish a similar, and more overt, effect to that of Matta-Clark’s piece. By integrating the frame and its contents into the walls, I literally bring the language of photography into the work as an empty sign. While Krauss

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understands Matta-Clark’s cutting as highlighting the presence of the building as a past occurrence, I hope that my own cutting out is truly atemporal in that it might suggest that it was once present or will be present in the future.

Both interpretations of the frames in Home Improvements include some understanding of photography as a central topic of concern. As a ghostly presence, the empty frames become representative of the act of cutting, they signify the process of cropping, the photographic method. As a missing piece awaiting to be found or made, the emptiness of the frames are referenced to the of the kind of objects (sometimes photographic) that I have recently been fascinated with, those which advertise home-ness as a material, consumable thing. In this regard, the frames project a kind of violence onto the consumer’s approach to the household, where memory is some replaceable, renewable, material unit, to be purchased over and over again, to be integrated as the filling of what was once an empty space.
Vinyl/Film

The draping or wrapping of each of the sculptures in *Home Improvements* can be understood as photographic in two manners. The first relates back to Krauss’ definition of this photo as indexical sign or trace. And the second has more to do with the a general idea of photography and its properties as an object, and how this object is viewed.

In the first part of the essay *Notes on an Index*, Krauss describes a photograph of Man Ray’s which describes the dust gathered on Duchamp’s piece (which is considered, in more than one instance that I am familiar with, as a photograph itself) the *Large Glass*. She explains that the accumulation of dust on the glass can be understand as an index for the passage of time.\(^\text{10}\)

The covering of furniture or objects with clear plastic is a tradition many might think of in relation to their grandparents. As an ode to a past generation it represents a mind set of the victims of the early 20th century economic Depression in the United States, a mind set which was concerned with the preservation of objects, for fear of their damage or loss or absence. The vinyl is an homage to the kind of anxiety which surrounded objects in this particular era, but also in a more broader sense it references this anxiety as a marker of the sentimentality with which people regard their household objects. The presence of dust on the vinyl in my show may not have been overtly visible, but it is suggested by the presence of the vinyl. The clear coating on each of the sculptures establishes this type of futile barrier between

\(^{10}\) Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index", p.75
world and thing, or rather world and the thought of a thing, and therefore invites into the viewer’s mind a consideration of the notion of accumulation. It is in itself an index for the world as containing materials or ideas which are invasive to the object of the home. The vinyl as a wrapping can again be understood in the context of the index, a suggestion of the process outside of itself, a material which acts as the consequence of something unnamed, unidentified. In the context of the gallery, the vinyl serves no real purpose as a protective shield. In this regard it places the objects of the exhibition in the context of another world.

The initial reason which I can identify as motivating my placement of the vinyl onto each sculpture has to do with the material barrier it creates between the viewer and the object of the sculpture. Its presence in Home Improvements can be read as a kind of drapery, but also as a suffocating element to each work. In both cases, the vinyl serves as a barrier between viewer and thing, and in this way it is both the thing through which the artwork in the show must be viewed (literally, through its transparency) and it is the object which prevents or limits proper vision of the materials of the sculptures. Like a photograph, it presents itself as a flattening mechanism, yet allows the viewer an entrance into the world of the work. It works as a barrier and as a mode of

Marcel Duchamp, Large Glass, 1923.
presentation. It is a kind of film; it catches light and displays new information to the eye.

Zilka Gallery, Detail: Mantle 1 (British Oak*, Roman Yellow*), 2016
3

The (In)Utility of Metaphor

Home Improvements as known through the unknown
Home Improvements deals heavily with the issue of the unknown. One reading of the show places the pieces in the context of its unfilled gaps, eliciting in the viewer their experience of a fully formed house, an experience which is denied by the show. Another reading, conversely places the objects of the show in the context of their separateness as a decidedly individuated, as an asocial gathering of material structures. In both cases information is purposefully missing and the experience of the show is challenging because of it. Home Improvements centers around the idea that meaning lies in absence, in what is withdrawn.

The contemporary philosophy of Object-Oriented Ontology addresses the problem of considering objects as containing their own withheld realities. Harman Graham, a professor of philosophy at Cairo University, lectured on OOO at the ICA in London on the manner in which Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) relates to art and art making. One of his claims is that all things possess their own reality which can never be known or spoken about directly by human beings.\(^{11}\) While we can come into contact with a thing according to the manner in which we perceive them, their properties as Real Objects can only be alluded to. Graham claims that in the process of talking about an object through allusions, we get closer to the information which is not readily available about the reality of a thing. I am interested in testing Harman Graham’s claim that metaphor and allusion are the frameworks which permit a person to get closer to the reality of a thing. I believe that Home Improvements explores the idea of the withdrawn in OOO, because of its emphasis on absence. While Home Improvements

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invites the viewer to engage with metaphor and illusion to compensate for this absence, I am unsure it is a satisfactory way of thinking about the work.

Pamela M. Lee writes the following in response to symbolic interpretations of Gordon Matta-Clark’s Splitting(fig 1): “A longer narrative of the house lays bare the dangers in treating it as a metaphor for stability, permanence, security—as if the metaphor itself were not ideologically embedded, free of its own constructedness. To subscribe to this iconography is to defer, however implicitly, to the myth of the suburban home—the dream of middle-class America”.12

Thinking about the house as a metaphor for what it represents is a process, a construction that gets overlooked in practice: in the act of dwelling the object of the house comes to stand for more than its physical presence—its significance is embedded with longstanding myths and representations. Much of Gordon Matta-Clark’s well known works address this problem through a confrontation with the material reality of the house. In destabilizing the structures we associate with the concept of the home, his work challenges the viewer to notice fragility in what the average person takes for granted. Furthermore, his work complicates what is most commonly regarded as a harmonious relationship between materials and ideology. It presents the dysfunction of structure as bringing about dysfunction in thought.

In addressing these problems we are forced to look at the level to which thinking about a house object depends on the longstanding tradition of treating the home as a metaphor for stability, permanence and security. I agree with Pamela M.

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12 Lee, Pamela M., Object To Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Page 21
Lee, in that this is in fact dangerous. But to what degree? Is it possible that the danger is not in the use of metaphor, but in the understanding of that metaphor as something which lacks information about itself as a thing which came into being? It is possible that Harman Graham may consider allusion an especially powerful mode of understanding because of the capacity for metaphors, when elucidated, to teach a person more about a thing than what was first apparent. I am all for metaphors if they are well understood, and regarded with the kind of fragility that any idea can possess. I believe that Home Improvements can be read as the literal representation of this struggle in recognizing the instability of the metaphor. Similarly to the work of Matta-Clark, Home Improvements destabilizes the structural integrity of one's common experience of the home and calls upon its metaphorical connotations by challenging their readiness. The house is no longer a whole, an entire representation of the feelings of comfort, stability etc... It is a series of objects, structurally incomplete, yet suggestive of their imagined completion.

There are a number of ways in which Home Improvements destabilizes one’s common experience of a house. The placement of a number of sculptures elicits a confusion of space with regard to the viewer’s orientation to floor, ceiling and wall. Ceiling Fan, for instance, takes up a considerable amount of the floor and establishes an overt subversion of the regular placement of a ceiling fan, and a ceiling, for that matter. In conjunction with the works from the rest of the show, Ceiling Fan appears as one of the more challenging works in that it makes it very difficult for the viewer to situate it in a real space, either the imagined space of the show, or some other
hypothetical house space. Its attractiveness as an object which claims the space around and near it, which has form, color, etc… overrides its effort to establish a ceiling on the ground, for this is not something which any other piece does. The reluctance of this piece to elicit the suggestion of a house space combines with the readiness of those pieces which are upright and more suggestive of a regular house space and forms a dissonance. The viewer is challenged to reconcile the immediacy with which the representation of a regular house can appear and disappear in Home Improvements. This is an experience charged with the weight of common understandings of the home and its metaphorical stability insofar as they are a burden to the experience of the show. In an effort to challenge Harman Graham and his comments on OOO in art, one could read this show as the direct criticism of his statement that what is normally withdrawn from the viewer can be known best through allusion. Home Improvements prevents its viewer with a considerable amount of empty space, yet I am confident that metaphor alone will not fill it with meaning.
“The invisible is defined by the visible as its invisible, its forbidden vision: the invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible ... the outer darkness of exclusion—but the inner darkness of exclusion, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure.... In other words, all its limits are internal, it carry(s) its outside inside it.“

_Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar_  
Capital “Reading”, 1970, (27-8)
The urgency of *Home Improvements* can be found in a study of its emptiness. This show is the cumulative material utterance of an extensive body of a past of unfinished works and ideas. It is a showcase of fragmentation: The sculptures display their collective incompletion as a gesture towards what remains withheld. The full meaning of *Home Improvements* lies in the viewer’s encounter with its lacunae.
Sources

Works cited


