

NEVER HOME

Richard Martin

Why is HOUSE not called HOME? Why might this matter – in these times, in this city?

In search of an answer, let's ask a man talking to himself in the 1970s in New York. To be more precise, let's listen in on a monologue recorded on a reel-to-reel tape deck and then played back to an audience of artists, gallerists, alcoholics, anarchists and motorcyclists (some of those categories overlap) eating takeaway food in a loft once owned by Mark Rothko. The man speaking on the tape, and the current occupant of the loft, is Stanley Kastle, whose very name calls to mind the power of domestic architecture and the fortifications we seek to draw up around us. As part of a rambling manifesto, Stanley starts to discuss the housing market and the language of real estate agents:

Home. We say 'home', not 'house'. You never hear a good agent say 'house'. A house is where people have died on the mattresses. Where pipes burst and freeze. Where termites fall from the sink spigot. Where somebody starts a flu fire by burning a telephone book in the furnace. Where banks repossess. Where mental illness takes hold. A home is something else. [...] A home is maintained. Cared for. Loved. The word *home* is savory like gravy, and like gravy, kept warm. A good realtor says 'home'. Never 'house'.

Stanley's monologue appears in Rachel Kushner's 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers*, a vision of New York in the 1970s that reminds us how that city, at that time, brought together new ways of domestic living and artistic practice. Downtown Manhattan's raw industrial spaces, abandoned warehouses and loft apartments inspired and staged thrilling performance pieces and immense installations. It's a model of urban living and making art that's been so seductive, not least in the areas of East London where HOUSE has often set up camp, that exposed pipes, industrial fittings, battered wooden floorboards and high ceilings are now the stuff of estate agents' dreams. These days, in this city, a good realtor (in a moral sense, an oxymoron) says 'urban loft-style living' rather than 'home'.

But Stanley's monologue in *The Flamethrowers* is worth hanging on to, especially when thinking about the meanings of a project like HOUSE. Take the context in which it is heard. Stanley's disembodied voice is projected into his loft when it's full of people – some of whom are close friends or lovers, while others are strangers; some guests are reminiscing about the past, yet others are planning empires of the future; one guest is quietly worrying whether she's 'on the side of good art', but another is 'too excited to tone down his sales pitch'; some are hungry to talk, and others are hungrier to listen. It's a performance, in other words, both on the tape and among the audience. A private space has suddenly been filled with social rituals, pleasures and anxieties.

For me, it's deeply reminiscent of the strange and thrilling possibilities created by HOUSE – moments when the usual habits of viewing art and talking about it were disrupted. Often these stemmed from the most ordinary of activities and spaces. At HOUSE 2, there was something distinctly odd about watching the arctic voyage in Angus Mill's video while sipping tea with some neighbours who'd popped round to see what was going on, the noise of huskies soundtracking the friendly chitchat. Similarly, Jo

Addison's sculptures in the next room seemed to be perfectly proportioned for a domestic environment and yet totally alien to it, becoming weird props lying amid the books, magazines and framed photographs. What was on display here: the room or its incongruous guests?

The dichotomy that Stanley sets up in *The Flamethrowers* – between the warmth and maintenance 'home' epitomises and the death, damage and distress of 'house' – also seems particularly apt for HOUSE 4. In fact, the discomfoting elements of 'house' recur again and again in the films selected for this part of the project. The discomfort was palpable at the start of François Ozon's *X2000* (1988), when neither the protagonist nor the HOUSE audience seemed entirely sure where we were, how we got there or how the people around us were connected. There were no termites in the sink, but Ozon does uncover the ants festering under the rubbish bin. Discomfort can also be felt in the circling movements, as queasy and threatening as the swinging pendulum imagined by Edgar Allan Poe, of Chantal Akerman's *La Chambre* (1972), especially those moments of simultaneous recognition and surprise when we see the director still lying there in bed. Is this a place where mental illness takes hold, the film seems to ask? Is she dying on the mattress? Perhaps she's just enjoying an apple.

To watch these films overlooking an Islington square – or, in HOUSE 5, to hear Jane Rendell discuss how her own domestic space became charged and changed (for her and her partner at the time) by the act of writing about it, while we sat in Dalston, an area beset by its own frantic redevelopment in recent years – was to be reminded that this was a project in which questions of class, taste, gentrification and property speculation were omnipresent. That 'house' is something, as Stanley says, that 'banks repossess' could hardly hold greater resonance today. The conversation in HOUSE 5 turned increasingly toward these matters, to the public inequalities wrapped up in private space. What discomfort hovers beneath the cheers when people gather to watch a concrete tower block being blown up? Why such overt joy when dreams of social housing and communal provision are dynamited?

Discomfort seems essential for these conversations to even begin. In these times, in this city, the cosiness of 'home' – and all that maintains it – becomes distinctly unsavory, and the uncertainty of 'house' – and all its termites and mental distress – seems infinitely preferable. So throw flames to the idea of 'home', make it warmer than gravy. Never HOME. Better HOUSE.

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March 2014

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