

THE HOUSE AS ART

TRESPASSING: Houses x Artists,
Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston
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Reviewed by Allison Hunter

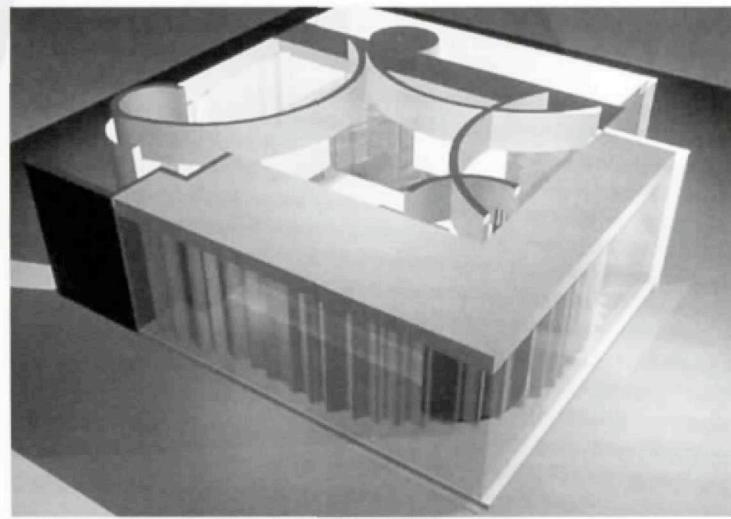
TRESPASSING: HOUSES X ARTISTS (read “houses by artists”) which was recently on view at the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, is the brainchild of Alan Koch and Linda Taalman, two up-and-coming architects with a penchant for interdisciplinary design. In 1997, they founded OpenOffice Arts + Architecture Collaborative to foster this project and others. In 2003, Koch and Taalman left New York (and Open Office) for Los Angeles, where they established a new firm, TK Architecture. The design duo is swiftly gaining prominence with this exhibition (organized jointly by Cara Mullio, the Bellevue Art Museum, and the MAK Center for the Art & Architecture, Los Angeles, and shown widely throughout the U.S.) and with recent projects such as the highly publicized *DIA: Beacon Museum*, converted from a 1929 factory, in Beacon, New York.

In the initial phase of *Houses x Artists*, artists worked with Koch and Taalman to generate more radical approaches to architecture, beyond the “things that you would [consider] if you’re working in a strictly logical system about rainwater or other dilemmas of shelter,” says Koch in the exhibition catalogue. The next step in the three-year process was to formalize their discussions as an exhibition. TK Architecture hand-picked nine artists — Kevin Appel, Barbara Bloom, Chris Burden, Jim Isermann, T. Kelly Mason, Julian Opie, Renée Petropoulos, David Reed, and Jessica Stockholder — whose work reflects “unresolved architectural ideas.” Each artist was asked to propose a “house concept” using whatever means was most relevant to their artistic practice. TK Architecture stressed to the artists that they should approach the program under ideal conditions, without the distractions of real-world constraints such as materials, budget, neighborhood, or site. In the final phase, it was hoped that collaboration with TK Architecture would produce a viable architectural proposal.

Koch and Taalman soon discovered that artists’ optimal working conditions can mean “defying natural properties of time and space” (which Barbara Bloom proposes) — not exactly ideal conditions for building a house. The final results are an eclectic mix of house designs ranging from a sculptural take on the pre-fabricated house (Opie, Isermann, Mason), to the artists’ dream home (Reed, Stockholder), to the house as conceptual art (Burden, Appel, Petropoulos, Bloom).

Opie, Isermann, and Mason approach the house as a flexible system of ready-made components. Their simplistic cast forms (Opie and Isermann) and appropriated industrial components (Mason) leave the viewer wanting more architecturally and pictorially. Opie’s “Concrete U-blocks” is made of 23 blocks cast in concrete, each block roughly eleven inches square (at 1:10 scale). The work was displayed in a cluster on one of the gallery room floors, near two computer-generated vinyl prints illustrating more elaborate configurations. On a pedestal nearby, a more intriguing model in wood and Plexiglas better illustrated Opie’s interlocking U-shape design. Beyond this work, one found Isermann’s “Scale Roof and Structure Prototype” mounted at chest-level. A series of identical yellow cast-polyurethane foam panels rest over a simple steel structure, like a geometric car port. In the same room, one discovered T. Kelly Mason’s “Catalogue Layout,” made of laminated pages bound by plastic rings, on a bench. “Layout” is meant to look like a proof version of a catalogue for Mason’s house components. It is printed with Post-it notes (an office-supply take on the trompe l’oeil effect) that include comments over illustrations. “Catalogue Layout,” reproduced as a final product in the exhibition catalogue, includes a typed letter to the “Investor” signed, “T. Kelly Mason, VP of Sales.” Mason’s project seems tongue-in-cheek, yet the deadpan exhibition catalogue claims his house model is “...a working machine designed, ultimately, to make its owner take responsibility for a series of aesthetic decisions.” Next to the bench were Mason’s two bare-bones house models on pillars; inside each was a large stone. Along a dividing wall were two large-scale color photographs: one of fruit, the other of shed-like metal buildings (which do not look like his scale models).

David Reed’s “Interactive Model, 2002” (with TK Architecture) is a half-finished model for an art collector’s “bedroom/pavilion.” Viewers are encouraged to rearrange the collection of two-dimensional artwork (tiny magnets with color reproductions of paintings) and roof designs (on acetate sheets). Two miniature versions of queen-size beds slide in and out of the central area on tracks. Future display designs are made possible by an underground storage area that holds art, a library, and a scale model of the house. Reed’s model is intentionally rough, with



David Reed, “Reed House Perspective 3D Model (Plan B),” 1999.

exposed foam-core walls and the like evoking a construction site and a ruin — and a gesture to Robert Smithson, an outdoor installation artist of the 1960s.

In a corner near the entrance of the Blaffer gallery, Chris Burden’s “Small-Small Skyscraper Model” grabbed viewers’ attention as the mini-elevator transported a paper cut-out of a human figure up and down the narrow structure of glass, wood, and steel. Burden’s “quasi legal” outbuilding ironically meets Los Angeles code since it is “under 400 square feet and under 35 feet high,” it can be constructed without a permit. Burden’s skyscraper-built-for-one, with its glass elevator, perfectly frames the paranoid exhibitionism often associated with L.A.’s movie industry. Early concept drawings such as “Mini-Skyscraper on Little Mesa,” a black-and-white photograph (taken by Burden) of a mesa in a desert area, are found in the exhibition catalogue. Burden uses his location shots as backgrounds for humorous illustrations in thick black marker, ballpoint pen, and White-Out liquid, where his outbuilding is seen “floating as a house boat” on the side of a cliff and on a little mesa. On the facing pages, TK Architecture’s technical drawings translate the artist’s imagined spaces into working plans.

Petropoulos’s “GSMM models, 2002,” so-named for “Gas Station MiniMart,” is accompanied by a heavy-handed “film collage,” titled “2 or 3 Things I Know About Her,” which was displayed on a television monitor in a small room next to her installation. The viewer was wise to skip this endless stream of hand-held shots of a gas station minimart, intercut with short interviews, highway scenes, and full-screen text spelling words like “SAFETY.” The barely audible soundtrack combines a whispered narrative between a man and woman with unedited audio from inside the minimart, and war factoids. Petropoulos’ GSMM models, displayed in the adjacent room, are replicas of minimart structures converted into livable spaces through interior decorating strategies such as gutting banks of refrigerators for bookshelves. In front of the models were several banquettes with headsets playing “Gas Station/Minimarts,” a compelling

soundtrack of conversations between minimart employees and customers which, when isolated from the film, manages to be poignant.

Bloom’s “MOOD RING HOME” installation took over the corner of a large room, where she had staged a “template” of a house that includes chunky candy-colored wood and fabric furniture, resembling a half-hearted IKEA showroom. On one table, there was a homemade pentagonal-shaped board game with an accompanying manual the size of a CD case. The board is dotted with generic game pieces and small cardboard squares. The square game pieces depict furniture, a door, bed, lamp, and so on, in stylish hand-painted illustrations, copied from Chinese language flashcards. Bloom’s CD-Rom computer game (designed by Douglas Reppetto), installed on an Apple notebook computer placed conspicuously on a coffee table near a couch, could not be accessed during my visit. The lime-green computer was closed, with a hand-written “out of order; do not touch” warning. The low production values of the furniture and game board beguile anyone familiar with this established artist’s body of work such as “The Reign of Narcissism,” a polished mixed-media installation roughly a decade older. Bloom’s contribution is best represented in the exhibition catalogue with high-quality reproductions of early designs (including a high-rise building and an elevated spinning building with moving sidewalks).

In the end, the disconnect in the program that led the artists to approach their house concepts with varying degrees of liberty creates a crack in the exhibition’s foundation. Given the illegal connotations in the title *TRESPASSING*, we expect subversive, “anti-architectural” concepts, not working models, blueprints, or, worst of all, slick 3-D renderings. For the most part, the truly experimental moments in *TRESPASSING* occur in the conversations between artist and architect within the pages of the exhibition catalogue. As Bloom comments in her conversation with Koch and Taalman, “Maybe the key is not to concentrate on the solutions, but to stay with the questions.” ■