First published in *Bedroom Eyes: room with a view*, catalogue accompanying an exhibit curated by Patricia Watts, Visual Arts Center Main Gallery, California State University, Fullerton, CA, 1992.

View to a Room

AWould you have no flies in your bed chamber? Don't spread about sugar to attract them into it.@

—Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*

Buzz Spector

That delightful niche, that pleasurable arcade, sanctum sanctorum, chamber of love's multitudinous commerces; its frictions, disturbances, satiations; lonely pavilion whose emptiness is never thorough, but rather, haunted by absences, departures; dream palace, where sleep's phantasms preside over the bleary disorientation of morning. The bedroom is the domestic space reserved for birth, death, and sex, the night court of family politics, and pulpit of conjugal monologues uttered by the sleepless to the sleeping. While not the site of desire, the bedroom is certainly its destiny; and, notwithstanding the pleasures of couplings elsewhere, those liaisons are charged by an erotics of dislocation.

The bedroom is, critically, as much a set of activities as a place. It serves, in art, as a structure of meaning whose connections to perception, belief, and experience comprise its metaphorical architecture. The first great Western bedroom painting might be Jan van Eyck's *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, 1434, in which a young couple exchange wedding vows in a symbolically replete Renaissance bridal chamber. Earlier, of course, we have such predecessors as the stone beds embellishing Etruscan sarcophagi, the curtained bowers of Greek and Roman frescos, and the depictions of the Nativity or the Adoration of the Magi gracing many Medieval altarpieces. But previous depictions of bedrooms offered them up as relatively simple spaces or furnishings, there to provide a place for the event within the picture—voyage to the afterlife, orgy, sacred birth—to happen.

Van Eyck's canopied bed, looming to the viewer's right behind the betrothed couple, is placed obliquely to the picture plane. The bride's shadow falls upon it, an indicator of the path towards consummation the pair will take as soon as the witnesses, depicted in the bedroom mirror, depart. The painting, then, is a kind of pictorial marriage certificate, whose technical brilliance, displayed in its inventory of reflections, textures, and gestures, is wedded, in another

sense, to its iconography of the Christian married state. From such details as the bride's carelessly doffed sandals or the slightly overripe apple resting on a nearby bench we can infer a desire that subtly chafes against the sacramental aspect of the wedding ceremony, and from the variety of its furnishings, we read the several worldly functions of the room.

The history of European art has bequeathed us many other splendid bedrooms. From the sumptuous divans of Titian, whose preening Venuses are models of indolent pleasure, to Vermeer's spare and luminescent quarters with their ladies writing letters; from the silk and velvet curtained seduction chambers of Boucher or Fragonard to J.L. David's classicist deathbeds (of Socrates, Marat, Brutus's sons); the bedroom emerges as one of the great stages of painted moral rhetoric. Indeed, the painting that T.J. Clark calls "the founding monument of modern art,"[1] Manet's *Olympia*, 1863, confronts us with the boudoir of a prostitute.

A naked young woman, rendered with unflattering particularity, reclines atop rumpled sheets while a maid stands alongside the bed unwrapping a bouquet of flowers. The bed is painted as if flattened against the picture plane. The darkened room, visible above and between the patterned screen framing the woman's head and the leaning form of the maid, is apparently well-appointed, but too dimly lit to tell us much about the social circumstances of its occupants. That nude figure, staring out at us, "makes hay with our assumptions as spectators, and may lead us to doubt the existence on canvas of three dimensions, the female body, and other minds.... The painting insists on its own materiality, but does so in and through a prostitute's stare, a professional and standardized attentiveness, with the self reserved from the purchaser's looking."[2] The secondary rhetorical contrivances of *Olympia* never add up to any story that might protect the sensibilities of its viewers from the brute fact of her nakedness, her unsubjugated availability to our collective gaze.

The bedroom serves as a metaphor of anxious desire, isolation, and dream imagery in modernist art. Marcel Duchamp assembled the quintessential surrealist bedroom as part of his installation of the Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme, 1938, at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris. Duchamp's design of the central hall is perhaps best known for its 1,200 coal sacks hung from the ceiling, but it also featured a simulated lily pond surrounded by actual ferns and weeds. Writing about the installation, William S. Rubin noted that next to the pond "stood a sumptuous double bed, above which hung [Andre] Masson's *Death of Ophelia*, echoing the implications of the pond and empty bed."[3] During the exhibition, Duchamp's bed was used as the set for a dance

---

[1] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 79.

[2] Ibid., p. 80.

[3] William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968, p. 154.

performance by Helen Vanel, entitled "The Unconsummated Act," featuring the dancer cavorting alone atop its rumpled sheets, the surrounding swampiness surely reading as a chthonian matrix of female sexuality.

In painting, too, the bedroom became a symbol of the disquieting alienation of modern life. The erotic and fantastical works of Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux included moonlit bedrooms populated by dreamlike nude women. Delvaux's countryman, Rene Magritte, also painted several bedroom scenes, notably *The Threatened Assassin*, 1926-27, in which a melodramatic episode is suggested by the bowler-hatted "detectives" hiding in the hallway outside the boudoir in which a nude female corpse is sprawled on a bed while a well-dressed man listens to an old record player. In *Personal Values*, 1952, the bedroom wall is a painted sky, while various objects situated around the space: comb, shaving brush, wine glass, matchstick, and a bar of soap; have been rendered as though gigantic, a pictorial device foreshadowing the later environments of Claes Oldenburg. In America, Edward Hopper used the figure in the bedroom to represent the prosaic mysteries of domestic life. In one of his later works, *A Woman in the Sun*, 1961, the solitary nude figure of an aging woman stands by a sunlit window, wearing, in the words of Robert Hughes, "nothing but a cigarette. In the painting, the distances between wall and wall, window and sky, or the lit edge of the curtain and the worn radiant torso, take on something of the space in a good de Chirico, but they are also suffused with human meaning, an inalienable sense of the here and now."[4]

In the late 1950s, a number of artists began exploring the referential implications of found objects and the poetic implications of real space as part of a movement against the philosophical universalism of Abstract Expressionist art. More concerned with connecting the art experience to the phenomena of the real world than with inchoate expressions of spiritual transcendence, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Nevelson, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg worked with mundane materials, often salvaged from the streets, to make assemblages and environments that suggested the flux and physicality of everyday life.

Rauschenberg's "combines" are constructions of commonplace objects on which he has also painted or drawn, resulting in works that operate both as painting and sculpture. Perhaps the most startling of these works is *Bed*, 1955, in which the artist mounted an old quilt, pillow, and sheets to a wooden armature and then painted on them. Calvin Tomkins described the results as looking "like the scene of a bloody ax murder," but then goes on to quote Rauschenberg: "I think of Bed as one of the friendliest pictures I've ever painted.... My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it."[5] The mixture of exuberance and drama that characterizes

---

[4] Robert Hughes, *Nothing if not Critical*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, p. 230.

[5] Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, New York: Doubleday & Company,

Rauschenberg's combines achieves its most potent affect in *Bed* because the titular rubric of the object possesses so many profound associations with the making—and unmaking—of relationships.

Instead of finding his objects, Oldenburg recreates them, with an artful ineptitude—too big, too hard, too soft, too lumpy—that has become his trademark shift of signification. In *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963, he put together a roomful of slightly out-of-scale furnishings, including a bed, lampshades, end tables, vanity, chairs, and even "pictures" on the walls, covered in outlandishly fake patterns of leopard and zebra skin, *faux*-marbling, and assorted checks, that become a Pop Art parody of middlebrow taste. Here is the bedroom as theatre, or as Rosalind Krauss more specifically located it, "a theatre of cruelty."[6] Krauss connects the theatricality of Oldenburg's work to the sculptor's participation in the "happenings" and other performance events staged in New York in the late 1950s and early '60s. But the viewer who is invited to "act" in front of Oldenburg's tableaux isn't given any script, and the inappropriate sizes and textures of these "props" are obstructions to precisely the domestic uses that their forms would initially suggest.

At roughly the same time as Pop Art was emerging in New York, several west coast artists, including George Herms, Bruce Connor, Wallace Berman, and Edward Kienholz, were redefining assemblage in terms of scale and social consciousness. Kienholz, especially, adopted a sardonically critical stance towards American society, most fully expressed in his enormous constructed environments. Here we find some of the bleakest bedrooms ever envisioned. The threadbare 1940s brothel in *Roxys*, 1961, the dismal cell in *The State Hospital*, 1966, and the flophouse decrepitude of *Sollie 17*, 1979-80 (constructed with Nancy Reddin Kienholz), are variations on theme of alienation and social oppression. Germano Celant describes the connections between the private spaces Kienholz builds and the moral emptiness of the social landscape that, metaphorically, surrounds them as "embodiments of the yearning to flee (or adjust to) the rhythms of urban life, a life based on the void, on absence."[7] Kienholz makes spaces that are cluttered with the junky belongings of their inhabitants, using this banal detritus to stand in for the inner chaos of emotions and memories that have so burdened his subjects.

The psychic bonds of isolation could hardly be more effectively embodied than in the

---

1980, p. 137.

[6] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York: Viking Press, 1977, p. 232.

[7] Germano Celant, "Isolation Cells," in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, in conjunction with Abbeville Press, New York, 1986, p. 228.

grim little bedroom of Kienholz's *Sollie 17.* The old man of its title is represented by a trio of flesh colored mannequins, each clad only in stained white briefs. One figure reclines on the sagging single bed, holding a tattered paperback in one hand while massaging his testicles with the other, the second figure sits on the side of the bed in a posture of abjection and despair, while the third figure stands at the nearby window, staring out at the photograph of an urban skyline mounted in its frame. The mannequins operate like a freeze-frame enactment of the pathetically limited range of Sollie's bedside world.

Laura Chester describes the bed as the symbol of marital intimacy. In the foreword to *The Unmade Bed*, an anthology of prose and poetry about married love, she writes that a "sumptuous disarray of sheets reminds us that the best of all conjugal comforts is rarely nice and neat."[8] She also notes the "darker aspect reflected in [that] title, for when the marriage itself is being unmade, torn apart, when love is no longer there—'Chaos is come again.'"[9] Making and unmaking are fundamental aspects of artistic practice, and a number of contemporary artists have used the bedroom and its furnishings as a means of examining the many gradations of desire and disillusionment, fidelity and estrangement, separation and union, to be found in the fundamental relationships of family life.

Eric Fischl, Robert Yarber, and Karen Carson are have painted psychologically charged bedroom scenes in which viewers are implicated as voyeuristic observers of the intimate circumstances of their subjects. Fischl's *Father and Son Sleeping*, 1980, shows two naked men asleep, in nearly identical postures, on a huge and unblanketed bed. Both pairs of legs are twisted to one side, covering their genitals, while both heads are turned upward, letting us stare at their closed eyes. But the circumstances of this shared slumber are inexplicable to us. Their naked vulnerability is rather more sinister than sympathetic. In *Master Bedroom*, 1983, Fischl offers one of the more striking metaphors of teenage eroticism in recent memory. A young girl, perhaps fifteen years old, wearing only panties and garish pink hair curlers, kneels in the middle of a rumpled bed and hugs a large black dog. While the pose isn't overtly sexual, the girl's "come hither" expression subverts the possibility of an innocent reading of the situation. Neither gaze—the girl's or the dog's—is quite directed towards the viewer, as if both subjects have averted their eyes in the awareness of being looked at. Robert Storr has characterized Fischl's work as provoking "a deliberate confusion among the points of view of the artist, the subject and the viewer [that] forces one to consider one's actual relation to the private and public myths

---

[8] Laura Chester, Foreword to *The Unmade Bed*, New York: Harper Collins, 1992, p. xv.

[9] Ibid., p. xvii.

embedded in what one sees."[10]

Robert Yarber's scenes of urban angst are garishly rendered, in iridescent day-glo colors with a use of vertiginous space, transforming their banal settings into premonitory emotional intrigues. Marie de Alcuaz describes his work as "eerie caricatures of [the] modern dilemma.... There is an abundance of 'gesture as information' depicted in a world where *real* values are meaningless." [11] We view the sleeping couple in *Sign Off*, 1984, from above and behind the television set they have evidently fallen asleep while watching. The sleepers and the snow-filled screen of the TV are reflected in the bedroom window, against the angry reddish glow of the city. Almost unnoticed in the window is the silhouetted form of a dog, apparently falling from an upper floor of the building. In *The Immortals*, 1986, the passionate couple grappling in mid-air above an unwrinkled bed are so carried away by lust that they defy gravity. As in the earlier *Sign Off*, the city seen through the bedroom window glows eerily in red. Yarber's palette favors the lurid over the serene, while his flourishes of brushwork add an anxious note to each scene.

Better known for her abstract painted constructions of the 1980s, Karen Carson began making the charcoal and pencil drawings of her "Bed Series" in 1972. These graphic meditations on the multiplicitous nature of the bed are full of exuberant visual puns and bravura technique. Carson's skillful rendering is tempered by her interest in what Colin Gardner has called an "habitual dislocation of space... as she seduces the viewer through playful linear illusion."[12] The compositional dynamics of these works formally reiterate the emotional ambiguities of Carson's bed setting.

Rona Pondick's bed sculptures are an important aspect of an *oeuvre* concerned with the paradoxical connections between desire and repulsion. Her beds are simple structural archetypes, joining the formal syntax of minimalist art to psychological loaded references to the body and its products. Terry R. Myers describes the effect of Pondick's work as "exploit[ing] the formal in order to present the primal."[13] Pondick often sets rodlike masses, simultaneously excremental and phallic; or found objects connected to infancy, such as nursing bottles or baby shoes; upon or

[10] Robert Storr, "Desperate Pleasures," *Art in America*, Vol. 72, no. 10 (November 1984): pp. 129-30.

[11] Marie de Alcuaz, "Contemporary Idioms of Surrealism," in *Ceci n'est pas le Surrealisme: California: Idioms of Surrealism* (exh. cat.): Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1983, p. 55.

[12] Colin Gardner, "An Accessible Intelligence," *Artweek*, June 29, 1985, n.p.

[13] Terry R. Myers, "Pressing Pleasures," *Arts*, Vol. 65, no. 3 (November 1990): p. 90.

around her bed forms. By so doing, she confronts us with these references to the most taboo and the most sacramental expulsions of which the body is capable. *First Bed*, 1991, is a block of wood on top of which Pondick has placed a stained and begrimed white pillow. Some twenty (mostly) mismatched baby shoes, knotted together by a rope grid, comprise the "blanket" covering the piece. This work, though naive in appearance, is marked by a mystery and a depth of allusion, and it thereby offers a poignant commentary on the childhood socialization process. The loss of innocence here is our own, tied to our knowledge of the implicit fetishism of those bound-together shoes, acting to pollute our reading of the work's formal unity.

Caryn Davis also makes troubling tableaux of bedroom life, mixing found objects and devices of her own construction. The ornamental four-poster bed in *Conspire*, 1990, is not only fitted with clean sheets but with a pair of bedside Kneelers in the style of those used in church services. References to betrothal and to sexual gratification are thus commingled, lending substance to the work's titular pun. Like Robert Gober or Annette Lemieux, both of whom also make ironical art using the trappings of domestic experience, Davis suggests that all is not well in family life, and that the sources of apparently public problems may well exist in the sustained and unquestioned daily rituals of the bedroom.

Whatever else takes place in the bedroom, it is mostly sleep that happens there, and the familiar contours of one's own bed provide the most consistent pleasure most of us know. Sleeping in a strange bed is always at least a little discomfitting, even when at the invitation of the other person to whom that bed belongs. What are we to make, then, of Sophie Calle's 1979 installation, *The Sleepers*? Also known as *The Bed* or *The Big Sleep*, this project consisted of the artist's invitation, accepted by 29 strangers, to sleep in her bed over the period of a week:

> "I asked people to give me a few hours of their sleep. To come sleep in my bed. To let themselves be looked at and photographed. To answer questions. To each participant I suggested an eight hour stay, that of a normal sleep."[14]

Despite offering clean sheets and a meal (breakfast, lunch, or dinner, depending on the time of the sleep), Calle's situation was clearly not hospitable in the same sense as that of a hotel or other public sleeping place. The critical lack of discretion informing the work came from its performative aspect. Deborah Irmas identifies *The Sleepers* as "a performance in [Calle's] private space.... While her subjects might believe they are participating with Calle in this activity, her consistently detached and formalized behavior in the gathering of personal data suggests the role of a behavioral scientist."[15] The installation's 176 photos and 23 texts mimics data without

[14] From a statement by the artist published in *Sophie Calle: A Survey* (exh. cat.), Santa Monica: Fred Hoffman Gallery, p. 13.

[15] Deborah Irmas, "The Camouflage of Desire," in *Sophie Calle:*

correlating it to some explicitly stated hypothesis about its component activity, just as Calle's "scientific" detachment is also unconnected to any professional rationale. The art of the experience is precisely its transgression, as we imagine of its participants similar fantasies of sex and power to those we conjure up while contemplating the work's public display. To an unknown bed, to sleep, perchance to dream, there's the rubric under which Calle solicits her bed partners.

The bedroom is difficult territory, encompassing the terrors and pleasures of the mind as does no other domestic space. It is the mental setting for the most vital reveries of circumstance and feeling. As Rosemarie Waldrop puts it, "a fallow evening stretches into unknown elsewheres, seductive with possibility, doors open onto a chaos of cul-de-sacs, of could-be, of galloping off on the horse in the picture."[16] Indeed, our dream travels exercise the same powers of apprehension and appreciation that, awake, we bring to the experience of art.

A Survey, p. 8.

[16] Rosemarie Waldrop, "*From*: The Perplexing Habit of Falling," in *The Unmade Bed*, p. 146.