

# Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday – Review

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## ***Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday***

by Imogen Racz

London New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015, 176 pages

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*Reviewed by Caroline Molloy, Coventry University, UK.*

According to art historian Imogen Racz, home is a site where we represent ourselves, gather our memories and perform our identities. In her book *Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday*, Racz seeks to contextualise post-war artists' responses to the topic. Although Racz points out that home has been a major theme in post-war art, to date there has not been a solo-authored publication that exclusively deals with the subject. Focusing on Anglo-American artworks, Racz does not attempt to be all-encompassing or comprehensive, but instead offers in-depth discussion of specific works that respond to divergent domestic themes.

Having established home as the overarching theme of her book, Racz goes on to use different but interconnected theoretical registers to structure her exploration of artists' engagement with the domestic. Each chapter looks at an individual theme, including: Enclosure; Windows and Doors; Female Space; Alienation; Unmade House; Withdrawal; Objects, Sentiment and Memory. Each employs a variety of methodologies, such as the politics of space, material culture, feminism and psychoanalysis, to unpack and discuss the above themes. This allows for rich and varied discussions contextualised by references to the writings of cultural theorists such as Doreen Massey, Daniel Miller and Walter Benjamin.

Bringing together artworks from different times, Racz explores the historical and cultural contexts for the works discussed; these include earlier twentieth century artefacts such as Man Ray's 1921 *Cadeau* (an iron with nails sticking out of the smooth surface) and Duchamp's famous 1917 urinal, *Fountain*. These focus points provide the foundation for the overarching narratives around art and the everyday. Inevitably, there are converging dialogues that run across the volume but in discussing the artworks thematically rather than historically a broader understanding of home is enabled.

Although Racz focuses mainly on sculpture, installation and object-based artworks as subject matter, discussions are not limited to visual arts. She calls on multi-sensory artistic disciplines, such as poetry, music and performance as engagement strategies to support cultural understandings of home. One of the most enlightening discussions is around the social relations of wallpaper; by examining differing wallpaper fashions and tastes, Racz explores wallpaper as a vocabulary that signals class. Evocative and vibrant descriptions of subversive patterns challenge the reader's pre-conceptions of wallpaper as a mute backdrop; Racz argues that it can function as a political tool for communication inside and outside of the gallery. Looking at a number of artists who work with concepts of the everyday in their practice, Racz also discusses the tensions of relocating the domestic within a gallery space. One example given is of Michael Landy's 2004 installation *Semi Detached*, an exact recreation of his childhood home exhibited in Tate Britain's Duveen

Galleries. This encouraged the audience to enter into a philosophical relationship with the installation and reconsider the physical spaces of home. Racz talks the reader through the installation experience successfully pointing out overlaps between the everyday and the imagined, encouraging the reader to reflect upon a life captured.

*Art and the Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday* would ideally benefit from a richer source of images to accompany the detailed descriptions. Although Racz successfully situates the reader in the artworks by describing each work's style, methods and intent, with limited illustrations to support the descriptions at times the reader is reliant on prior knowledge of the artworks to follow the narrative. *Art and the Home*, nonetheless, is a well laid out book and Racz succeeds in shedding light on home as a central framework in contemporary art. While the book is written within an art historical framework, as it draws on wider cultural and political influences it could equally appeal to the anthropological researcher interested in themes of home and belonging. Through its interpretation and argument, *Art and the Home* aims to disturb, challenge and enrich our understandings of art and life. Through its variety of themes and approaches, the book cleverly registers artworks within different fields of culture and identity, repositioning home in history, place and space.