

A domestic matter

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I. Abstract

This essay is an investigation of the phenomenon of home as an abstract idea. In the first chapter *The space in between*, I attempt to pinpoint where it is exactly that I find myself situated in relation to ‘the inside’ and ‘the outside’. I then continue by looking into immigration and its consequences, such as the Freudian idea of melancholia and the desire to create substitutes, in *One in thirty-three*. In *No walls*, I examine four works by four artists, Thierry de Cordier, Meta Isæus–Berlin, Francesca Woodman and Kimsooja, and elaborate on their understanding and representation of the concept of home. Lastly, I look into my master project in *A domestic matter*, recounting its starting point and development.

II. The space in between



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Circulation*, 2012. Oil and textile print on canvas, 90 x 60 cm

An outward-gazing seal behind a cupboard containing, among others, a glass jar, three hazelnuts, and a matchbox. The corner of a pipe located in the corner of a painting, and what looks like the stem of a desktop lamp mimicking the silhouette of the roof of a house. When asked where it is that I feel at home, this is my answer.

Having spent about half of my lifetime outside of my home country, not speaking my mother tongue and holding the status of “the foreigner”, the questioning of belonging versus alienation or, in other words, the dilemma of being an insider versus an outsider, as well as the concern of how to reconstitute a home have come to surface through my works.

As Gaston Bachelard once said in *The Poetics of Space*:

Everything about a creature that comes out of a shell is dialectical. And since it does not come out entirely, the part that comes out contradicts the part that remains inside. (Bachelard, 1994, p.108)

This contradiction of the inside and the outside, and existing in a place which is neither here, nor there is exactly what I am investigating through my work. I find that these two sides, composed of completely different physical, psychological, and cultural elements, have more in common than one might initially think. And since I find myself right in the middle of the two, finding the connection between them is a challenge I have taken upon myself in my life and work.

As a result of constant relocation, I came to notice that when one is outside, a part of them always remains inside and when one is inside, there is usually a part longing to be out. In this context, we can look at the inside as the home or the motherland that one leaves behind and the outside as the new, foreign land one finds him or herself in.

There are always remnants from the place that is left behind, which the traveler carries with them no matter where they go, in an attempt to relate the two places to each other. These are the objects on the shelves of the cupboard in my work "Circulation", for example, carefully handpicked from the mind and memory of a migrant. There is never a clean cut, or a traceless escape from a place, and the inside and outside are therefore forever intertwined.

The investigation of the above mentioned in between space takes place both in a physical, and a mental manner in my works. To take a look into the physical aspect first; there are animal figures in my recent paintings, which are situated where they do not belong, in order to describe a state of non-belonging or estrangement. To name a few examples: a hedgehog in a living room, a hen watching a Bergman movie or a seal underneath a desktop lamp as seen in "Circulation". (I believe it is redundant for me to say at this point

that these animals are representations of myself, being more than often situated in places that are foreign to me.)

Moreover, the tangible aspect of the space in between is also present in my method, through the use of collage, or in other words, of putting foreign elements together. This material variation is apparent in the painting “Circulation”, yet again, where the hand-printed textile pattern of a fox sitting in a chair is sewed onto the canvas. Two different planes of vision and visual realities are created, leading the eye of the viewer into wandering from one to the other, and thus having to spend an amount of time in the space in between.

Moving over to the mental aspect, it is evident that the gaze of the animal is always pointing somewhere away from the painting. This is a way for me to depict the co-existence of physical presence and mental wandering. The animals are longing for either the place they have already left behind, or the new place they have an urge to go to.

As an embodiment of difference, the stranger represents the doubtful existence and dubious truth of what is not spatially present, of what cannot be verified at first hand. Yet the stranger is nonetheless 'here', present, and thus throws the doubtful and flickering quality of absence and non-existence back into the faces of those insiders in the local community, throwing into question the sanctity of presence.

(Crang and Thrift, p.58)

Sociologist Rob Shields puts this idea in a clearer context in the quote above, by explaining how this particular semi-presence is an attribute only carried by the stranger, who somewhat leads a double life -physically and mentally-. Spaces are not as easily defined and locational notions that were once believed to be concrete are put into question once the stranger enters the picture.

III. One in thirty-three

Beware, then: however well you carry it off, however much you enjoy it, there is a dangerous undertow to being a foreigner, even a genteel foreigner. Somewhere at the back of it all lurks homesickness, which metastasises over time into its incurable variant, nostalgia. And nostalgia has much in common with the Freudian idea of melancholia—a continuing, debilitating sense of loss, somewhere within which lies anger at the thing lost. It is not the possibility of returning home which feeds nostalgia, but the impossibility of it.

In understanding the loss of a home, I believe the above quote from a 2009 article from *The Economist* called “The Others” might be useful. I believe it clarifies how one does not only feel like a foreigner when one is outside of his or her place of origin, but also when (or if) attempting to return to it. Because once homesickness emerges, it is there to stay.

Attempts to return to the initial dwelling will result in its habitants to look at the foreigner in a different way, since he or she has abandoned that place and has become an outsider to it at some point. As a result of this, he or she will never be a complete insider again. It seems therefore impossible for someone who has once become a foreigner to return home, and that physical presence and mental wandering are forever bound to exist together.

On the other hand, the habitants of the new dwelling that the foreigner ends up in bill him or her as the outsider as soon as he or she steps in. These two occasions are when the Freudian idea of melancholia emerges as a result of homesickness, and when the migrant needs to find a way to cope with it. According to Nikos Papastergiadis, professor for Cultural Studies and Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne, “There are only three options for an exile: to defer the homecoming to an idealized time in the future, to find a substitute home in the here and now, or else, there is

madness.’” (Alison, p.62) In this context, I have chosen the second option where I try to find a substitute home through the help of my paintings. And since, according to the International Organization of Immigration (IOM), “the total number of international migrants has increased over the last years from an estimated 150 million in 2000 to 214 million persons in 2012. In other words, one out of every 33 people in the world is a migrant.” (www.iom.int), I find myself somewhat fortunate among this 3% minority group, for having the means of creating a substitute for a home through my work.

At this point, I think it is of importance to clarify that I have a positive regard on the term loss. For it not only allows me to create substitutes for the things lost, but also to question necessities. (Had it been a forced migration, my outlook on loss might have been a lot different than it is now. However, since my relocations have been voluntary, I have managed to look at the term in a more open and objective manner.) When attempting to re-create things that are lost, such as a home, a particular object, a landscape or merely a feeling, I notice how much potential loss in fact has. It is much needed, in my opinion, in order to come to a realization of what it is that really matters in solidifying the concept of home.



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer,
The underbelly of domesticity, 2013.
Oil and textile print on canvas, 80 x 50 cm



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Vault*, 2012.
Oil on canvas, 154 x 92 cm

Looking at the two works above, the co-existence of physical presence and mental wandering is once again noticeable in both the rat and the hedgehog, which are staring away into the distance. In addition to that, remnants of a home are seen around the animal figures. Whether it is a Turkish teapot in “Vault”, or a plastic water container in “The underbelly of domesticity”, these are elements that I carry with me from my past homes, and that I use when re-creating dwellings in my paintings. In other words, these are things that find second lives and physicality once again in new settings now, whereas otherwise they would merely stay as thought or remembrance in the mind of the migrant.

Svetlana Boym states in her essay *Immigrant Arts, Diasporic Intimacy, and Alternative Solidarity*:

The home that one leaves and the home away from home that one creates sometimes have more in common than one would like to admit. A portable home away from home, which an immigrant ferociously guards, preserves an imprint of his or her cultural motherland. (Van Tomme, 2011, p.29)

I fully agree with her and would even take this further by saying that the home away from home carries more than just the imprint of the cultural motherland. For the lost motherland has been idealized, visualized and contemplated on in a way that would not have been possible if one had in fact been in the motherland. The new dwelling has become something new: something more than a home away from home and something more than the motherland. It is now a hybrid of two utopias in one, with elements from both worlds.

IV. No walls

Home can be many places and can exist without walls, without localities, or an address. This kind of existential homelessness does not necessarily have to do with the place where we live. In this interpretation, it is a kind of preparedness or an experience of the world as full of places where a person belongs – for a while. (Pavlovits and Penner, p.51)

I can relate to Danish anthropologist Ida Wentzel Winther's interpretation of home as a bodiless place in her essay *Homing Oneself*, and believe that it is the abstraction, and not the physicality, of a house that an immigrant gets attached to. I also find the idea of a place where someone belongs for a while quite intriguing, since it opens up the discussion of the variable and ephemeral quality of the feeling of belonging.

Winther takes her theory further by dividing the phenomenon of home into four categories: 'home as a place', 'home as an idea', 'the feeling of home' and 'homing oneself' (establishing a sense of home or tactics for feeling at home both at home and in other places.)

I will be referring to these categories when talking about four artists (Thierry de Cordier, Meta Isæus–Berlin, Francesca Woodman and Kimsooja) and their works in this chapter. I have chosen to look into these artists, who all work in different media than myself, in order to get a wider perspective on how the theme has been dealt with in a creative manner. De Cordier's work is a performative sculpture, Isæus–Berlin's an installation, Woodman's a photograph and lastly, Kimsooja's is a performance. Each and every one of these artists uses different materials and methods, yet the understanding of the concept of home serves as a red thread tying all these works (including mine) together.



Thierry de Cordier, *Passe Montagne*, 1983. Fabric and papier-mâché

Thierry de Cordier is one of the artists that investigates 'home as a place'. In his work *Passe Montagne*, de Cordier depicts the house as both a dwelling of the mind and the place in which a man lives. He literally inhabits it and relates it to the mother's womb or, in other words, to man's original dwelling. There are, without a doubt, references to the psychological aspect of home in his work. However, at a first glance, it is the physical place of dwelling that seems to be one the prominent issue the artist deals with. How much space does one really need to call something a dwelling? Does having privacy mean one has a place to call his or her own, or to call it home? Is the feeling of being sheltered equivalent to safety or to being at home?



Meta Isæus-Berlin, *Återblickens transparence*, 2004. Organza, 11 x 2 x 2,5 m

When it comes to ‘home as an idea’, I believe Meta Isæus–Berlin’s installation named *Återblickens transparance* achieves an accurate representation of the concept. The objects in the work resemble things that are in fact not there in reality and, at the same time, they seem to be on the ground when they are indeed lightly floating in the air. Is it the physicality of things or the ideas of them that make us feel at home? Do we need concrete existence in order to believe something is there or to keep an idea alive in our minds? Or is a simple memory or a floating idea enough to have a feeling of homeliness?

The transparent pieces of furniture in Berlin’s piece, to me, represent what I see as ‘the shell of a home’. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a shell is: (1) an external case or outside covering, (2) a thin, usually spherical layer or surface enclosing a space or surrounding an object. I refer to it as the ‘shell of a home’ in the second sense, for the work to me depicts the invisible layer surrounding the house and its contents. The shell is outside and beyond the concrete home itself, and completely encompassing the spirit of one. It is the unchangeable idea of a home that we have with us in different dwellings, yet at all times. Berlin’s particular work, as I see it, accurately demonstrates how a migrant lives with the idea (and not the materiality) of a home.



Francesca Woodman, *Space2*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 13.7 x 13.3 cm

Having mentioned the 'shell of a home' in relation to Berlin's installation, I think it is relevant to take a look at the artist Francesca Woodman's work. In her photograph above, *Space2*, she literally peels the shell of a house and becomes one with it. As Whitney Chadwick, professor emerita of art history at San Francisco State University describes it: "Woodman inhabits her house in a manner that conveys an unsettling disturbance of physical and psychological boundaries, a fear of the absorption of her ego within an ominous, abandoned setting." (Chadwick, p.169) Woodman investigates 'the feeling of home' and connects it directly to the self.

In this context, I would like to pinpoint that the feeling of home seems to be of incaptivation or suffocation in her case, which is a big contrast to how I see it. However, I think it is a strong piece depicting the emotional relationship we have with home.



Kimsooja, *Migrateurs*, 2007. Single Channel Video, 10:01, Silent

Lastly, Kimsooja, born in Seoul and currently living in Paris, New York and Seoul, finds ways of 'homing herself' in different settings through the help of her works. In my opinion, she represents Svetlana Boym's term of the 'imprint of one's cultural motherland' in her work *Migrateurs*, where she carries around bottaris (the Korean term for bundle) in a truck around Paris

which “become symbols of the restive or restless, the stateless, uprooted, and uninvited, of the stranger or foreigner.” (Reckert, 2012) In short, she is carrying the part of her that has remained inside the motherland with her, no matter where she goes. I can relate this work to some of what I attempt to do in my paintings, since finding substitutes for significant objects through my paintings evoke the feeling of a home to me. Through re-creating these objects, I somehow manage to home myself wherever I am. With this in mind, Kimsooja’s bundle takes the form of a teapot or a carpet in my case.

V. A domestic matter

Through my master project, I aim to create a substitute for the feeling of homeliness, in accordance to my understanding and experience. In order to achieve this, I am doing a series of paintings, following the path opened up by some of my works presented above, which later on will find home in a setting that enhances their meaning and relevance.

In order to help me create this setting, I have designed a textile pattern. It consists of a donkey connected to one donkey through the rear and another through a leg. Out of what seems to be half a common leg between two of the donkeys emerges a windmill, symbolic of a shift of air, or in other words, of transition. Moreover, there is a hen situated between the donkey figures, standing in solitude and not connected to any other imagery in the pattern.

All of these elements in the pattern are taken from two separate paintings completed in the fall of 2012. The images are cut and re-arranged in a new fashion, bringing back the collage element and putting the notion of origin and place of belonging into question.



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Dwelling*, 2012.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Bergman Hen*, 2012.
Oil on canvas, 70 x 48 cm



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Make yourself at home*, 2013. Textile print, 136 x 82 cm / repeat

The pattern will first and foremost take the form of a hand-printed textile wallpaper which will cover the wall where the paintings will be presented, giving hints about the interior of a home. It will later on be used as an element of collage in the paintings themselves, allowing me to experiment with planes of vision once again. I have tried out this method of installing my works in *Spare Parts*, a recent solo exhibition I had at PG Art Gallery in Istanbul in March 2013. The outcome was quite close to the result I wanted to achieve, technically as well as conceptually.



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Spare Parts* exhibition view, PG Art Gallery, Istanbul, 2013

In addition to the two functions, taking the form of a wallpaper and an element of collage in the paintings, I used the textile pattern to upholster an antique chair in the exhibition. This way, I could not only put rootedness into question, with the chair being a strong symbol of domesticity and settlement, but also strengthen the illusion of a home that I was after.



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Settle down*, 2013. Chair and textile print, 96 x 40 x 40 cm.

For my master project, I would like to take the three dimensional aspect of my work further by not only using a piece of furniture, may it be a stool, a coffee table or simply a shelf, but also introducing a 'ghost sculpture' of an object taken from one of the paintings.



Hale Güngör Oppenheimer, *Ghost pot*, 2012. Paraffine, 40 x 15 x 15 cm

To briefly explain the idea of a ghost sculpture, I will go back to the term ‘shell of a home’, which I mentioned in the chapter *No walls* in relation to Meta Isæus–Berlin’s piece. This term refers to the thin, usually spherical layer or surface enclosing a space or surrounding an object. “Ghost pot”, is the re-creation of the teapot that was used in my painting “Vault”, giving a body to the abstract idea of the surface surrounding the object. It is the memory of the teapot that is depicted through the sculpture, and not the physical existence of it.

I hope to unveil parts of the scattered mind of a migrant in my master project by putting these different elements together in an installation that evokes the feeling of homeliness.

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