DEALING WITH FEAR
A Documentation By Akademie Schloss Solitude
http://www.dealing-with-fear.de/Symp1/hubbard_soentgen.html

Teresa Hubbard, Beate Söntgen
Home and Fear
An Email-Conversation after the Symposium's Talk

Teresa Hubbard's and Alexander Birchler's oeuvre is a work that deals heavily with meaning and structure of home, of dwelling, of furnishing in a literal and metaphorical way. In photographs and videos, characters are shown absorbed in inwardness or in actions that are not clearly readable: it is only the structure of narrativity, and not a concrete narrative, but loaded with mood, with a psychological atmosphere. The figures are situated in interiors that are mostly demonstratively shown as fake rooms, as settings just made for the depicted scene. But somehow these sets work as interiors, as telling spaces inhabited by the characters of the photographic series or video works. The interior, as we discuss it in this conversation, is a specifically modern phenomenon. Home, in our conception, is not an anthropologically constant factor. Our idea of privacy is rather new. It has risen with modern civil society, with the split between privacy and publicity, and it has to do with the modern idea, articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that the state is not only a community of subjects, but also the enemy of the individual. Thus, the private home becomes the place of retreat, the place where one is on his own and not on stage. Well, it is especially art, that tells us something else.

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *Eight,* 2001, High Definition Video with

sound, 3:35 min., loop

From the very beginning, the interior in art shows us that the world outside is rather present there, that the interior is constituted by a dialectics of inner and outer space. In the seventeenth century, the interior received a genre of its own, in the frame of an early form of civil society: In Pieter de Hooch's paintings, thresholds are obsessively present. These interiors are made of frames within frames within frames: doors and windows open the interior, figures pass from one room to another, intruders from outside seem to destroy the inner order, mainly in erotic terms. In Johannes Vermeer's *A Girl Asleep* we find other forms of thresholds. The girl is in a transitional mental state, that makes her available for the fantasies of the viewer, but access is blocked by furniture.

Pieter de Hooch: *The Linen Chest*, 1663, oil on canvas, 72 x 77.5 cm, Rijksmuseum/Amsterdam, _in: Peter C. Sutton: *Pieter de Hooch, 1629–1648.* Hartford 1998, p. 45, fig. 40

Johannes Vermeer: *A Girl Asleep*, around 1657, oil on canvas, 88 x 77 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/New York, in: Thierry Greub: Vermeer oder die Inszenierung der Imagination. Petersberg 2004, _p. 17, fig. 1

The nineteenth century is *the* century of the interior. Walter Benjamin has mocked at the bourgeois traveling only in his armchair, making the world a theatre in his limited space and perspective. The interior is the place where one constructs his or her own world, excluding all forms of alienation grounded in industrial and consumer society. At the same time, it is the place where the uncanny can lurk. In German, in the word for home, *Heim*, the uncanny is present: in the word *das Un-heimliche*. Sigmund Freud describes the home as the source of neurosis, especially sexual ones, that has to do with suppression talking place at home.


Stephanie von Fahnenberg: Living Room of Alexander von Fahnenberg at Wilhemstrasse 69, Berlin, 1837/1838, pencil, feather in violet, watercolor and opaque color on cardboard, 28.6 x 24.1 cm, Germanisches Nationalmuseum/Nuremberg, in: Sabine Schulz (Hrsg.): *Innenleben. Die Kunst des Interieurs von Vermeer bis Kabakov*. Frankfurt am Main 1998, p. 27, fig. 32

In pictures you find both the constructive character of the interior as a place of retreat and the disturbing traits of a menacing place. Henri Matisse's interiors are images of calm happiness in harmony with nature, which is shown in correspondence with female figure and plants. Modernity,

technique, and industry are banished. But the viewer is excluded from this harmonious world; it is not only opaque paint that closes this inner world. The chair offers access, but if you take place, you look out of the image, at yourself, dreaming of taking part in this constructed homely paradise. Painters like Félix Vallotton make erotic frictions visible and install a new narrativity, corresponding to the general interest in psychology, in a mixture of desire and fear in the female figure.


Henri Matisse: *Harmony in Red,* 1908, oil on canvas, 180 x 220 cm, Eremitage/Saint Petersburg, _in: John Elderfield: *Henri Matisse. A Retrospective*. New York 1992, p. 187, fig. 105
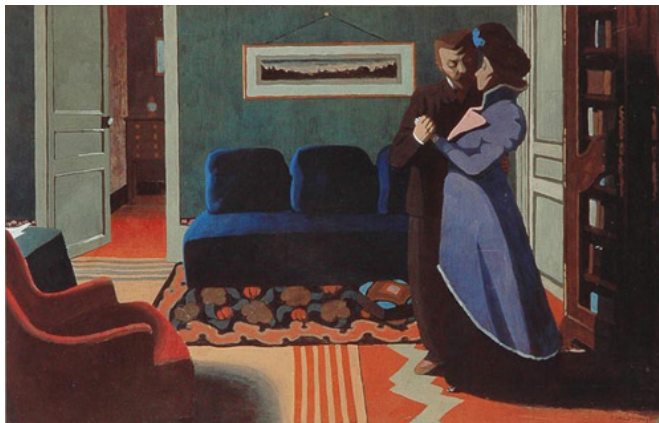
Félix Vallotton: *The Visit*, 1899, gouache, 55 x 87 cm, Villa Flora/Winterthur, in: Ursula Perucchi-Petri: *Intime Welten – Das Interieur bei den Nabis.* Berne, 1999, p. 41, fig. 26

Contemporary artists deal intensely with the interior and with home and fear. Here, the interplay between the interior and the media of its representation becomes a crucial issue. For example, Gregor Schneider has been working on his actual home, altering it again and again. He has displaced doors, walls, and windows in this installation that is his home. In *Haus u r,* the interior is experienced bodily, by crawling through narrow halls as uncomfortable places. This uncanny house confronts us physically with the effort needed to make one's own world, and it unmistakably reminds us that we will never be king of our own castle.
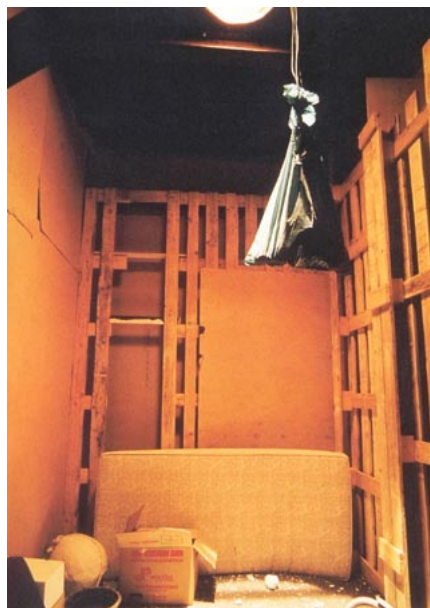
Gregor Schneider: *Haus u r,* since 1985, process of rebuilding the house on

Unterheydener Strasse in Mönchengladbach-Rheydt, in: *Gregor Schneider*. Milan 2003, pp. 145, 148_

Beate Söntgen (BS): Many of these aspects occur in your and Alexander's work. Here, the interior is presented as a—nearly violently—opened, box, lacking the fourth wall, with figures exhibited being caught in their surrounding called their home.

Teresa Hubbard (TS): The video and photographic work I create in collaboration with Alexander Birchler explores the interdependence between architecture and narrative, character and environment, psychic and physical space. Repeatedly in our work, we have approached the space of "home" as a kind of Pandora's box, as a casket. Within the history of photography and film, the casket, particularly as it relates to the home and a woman's place in it, has an extensive record. In our work, we play off this embedded record and explore how the opening of the box itself functions, as a frame, an aperture, a cut, a splice, an autopsy. The figures or characters in our work are agents in the act of navigating or, "architecting" their way through the space of the home. The threshold has been a pervasive physical and psychological element.

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *Stripping,* 1998, 5 C-Print photographs, each 145 x 180 cm

In the photographic series, *Stripping,* Alexander and I were living in Berlin at the time and the room fragments we started building were based on and partly salvaged from apartment

buildings in our neighborhood. At the time, I was reading *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, and we were thinking about the role of perspective and narrative. In a process of building and un-building fragments of these architectural spaces, the threshold began to emerge as the central protagonist. There was a direct correlation between the architectural fragment creating a narrative consequence and reflecting a camera's mechanisms of being "stuck," that of a piece of film material caught in between a frame that will not advance or rewind.

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *Stripping,* 1998, 5 C-Print photographs, each 145 x 180 cm

_There were many ways that the contingency of the threshold presented itself while we were making *Stripping.* We shot the images on a 6 x 7 camera, using 120 roll film, ten frame exposures per roll. When we picked up the first rolls of exposed film, we realized with a shock that the person in the development lab had cut through each image. Apparently, our rolls of film had caused quite some confusion at the photo lab. What happened was, the lab technician, with the length of film laid out in front of her, could not tell where each image frame started and where it ended. Looking over the strip of film, she would get to the black strip in the image and thinking that was the place between the frames, had taken her scissors and cut it there. After we got over the initial shock of her destroying all our film tests, we realized that actually, this was a really exciting spatial mix-up.

BS: You used such kinds of strips in you video work, too. What is the effect of such kind of interruption of the moving image?

TH: The cut and the slice, of course, has historical, temporal and media specific associations in both photography and film. Editing is historically grounded in locating the frame's edge, "the space between" frames on a strip of film. Yet, this black strip, physically thin and seemingly finite, is also a position where time can be compressed and expanded, indeed, for us in our work, it is a place that can be explored as a psychological void, as an architectural threshold or "threshole" to use a wonderful Gordon Matta-Clark word-play. The threshold continued to be a main protagonist in the work, *Single Wide,* which we completed as a part of a trilogy of video installations: *Eight* and *Detached Building.*

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *Single Wide,* 2002, High Definition Video with sound, 6:07 min., loop

BS: Is this "threshole," the psychological void, responsible for the uncanny aspect of Single Wide?

TH: Architecturally speaking, a singlewide is a design description of a home. A singlewide is designed foremost, with the road and driving in mind, and has standard proportions built to fit on the back of one single transportation truck. This design proports mobility and temporary shelter, a "house" rather than a "home," however, the socio-economic reality for the inhabitants often renders the structure as an immobile and

permanent shelter. I find that, the interior skeleton structure of a singlewide is analogous to a strip of photographic film, in that it has one horizontal, linear stretch of rooms, with one room coming after the next, each frame separated by a dark threshold. In the work, *Single Wide,* this analogy is embedded in the camera work and narrative progression that unfolds inside and outside the architecture.

In *Single Wide,* exposing the threshold entailed cutting off the back façade of the structure. I also see an aspect of this architectural "opening" or cut, in the same way rendered as a fresh or open wound, the cut that the woman in *Single Wide* carries on her body throughout the cycle of her actions.

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *Single Wide,* 2002, High Definition Video with sound, 6:07 min., loop

BS: Instability and fragility are main issues in the way you deal with configurations of figure and space. In Single Wide *this fragility is connected with socio-economic aspects, too. In* House with Pool *you chose a completely different kind of social setting.*

TH: *House with Pool,* which is a twenty-minute looping narrative, started with an opportunity to work in a vacated modernist house, designed by the architect, Roland Roessner. Built on a hillside in densely wooded acreage, the house had been vacated because, due to soil conditions and irreparable structural flaws, the house was slowly shifting and sliding down the hill. The physical elements of the house were the driving inspiration for us, and we worked directly on location to develop a script. The transparency of the house (lots of large glass windows) and the instability of its structure permeate the narrative cycle that interweaves the presence and absence of

three characters in and around the domestic space. Here, again, the threshold in *House with Pool* appears as a place and condition fraught with contradictions: as a temporal and spatial void; interior versus exterior; singularity separating togetherness; darkness separating light; the "before" separating the "after."

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *House with Pool,* 2004, High Definition Video with sound, _20:39 min., loop

Another important kind of interpretive territory in *House with Pool,* is that despite everything that occurs and slips between the three characters, despite an incredible amount of implied and physical exchange they have with one another, not a word is ever spoken. They do not speak as individuals nor is there any spoken dialogue that passes through or between them. I think this kind of silence opens up an interesting and challenging interpretative space for the viewer, as the act of interpretation is an act of defining oneself.

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *House with Pool,* 2004, High Definition Video with sound, _20:39 min., loop