

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

## Juan Araujo's Kammerspiel<sup>1</sup>

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The title of this text is an exact paraphrase of an essay written in 1988 by the great Canadian photographer Jeff Wall: Dan Graham's Kammerspiel.<sup>2</sup> Wall's piece, one of the most incisive and decisive essays on the crisis of international conceptualism, focused on one of Graham's works that had been created ten years earlier in 1978: *Alteration to a Suburban House*.

It is clear that since *Homes for America* (1966) Graham has articulated the idea of modularity – even in its extended and political form: the identification of modular space as the symbolic manifestation of an anonymous subjectivity, ideally democratic – around late twentieth-century American suburbia. And perhaps from Dan Graham to Robert Adams, Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy, the best of North American turn-of-the-century art identifies with the culture of post-industrial suburbia.

Notably, it would appear that Graham has built his work on the unceasing influence of the specular stage of modern architecture<sup>3</sup>. Projecting the utopia of the transparent house – the glass house – onto its diverse political dissemination, i.e. the house for all, and inviting us to think about the sum of the specular reflection devices that post-industrial culture has continuously produced. In doing so, instead of our image, we are presented with its void, or literally its absence, in the mirage of its never-ending kaleidoscope.

Curiously, looking at the arbitrary relationships Juan Araujo uses as poetic licence to build an argument that would go, regressively, from modern architecture to colour and from there on to the legend of Faust and the natural state (or from Vilanova Artigas to Goethe), I would like to point out the surprising analogy that exists between some of the paintings Araujo dedicates to the Baeta House or the Rubens de Mendonça House and the seminal model of *Alteration to a Suburban House*. In both cases, the large glass wall stands out – the great window, which from Mies van der Rohe to Marcel Duchamp has been an operational shifter of modernity and rupture, of modern rupture – and the planes of primary colour that also point to the modern, or at least its intention, its project – but only emblematically, as a deictic.

It is precisely these planes of colour in their deictic function in the architecture of Vilanova Artigas, their role as indicators for possible uses and spatial occupations, which led Araujo to forge the link with Goethe and colour theory – according to the account of his visits to these houses and his conversations with their inhabitants. Indeed, in the political decision to design houses that would be mechanisms for shared living, communal, the primary colours respond to two rationales in Artigas's architecture: an instrumental one that consists of using colour to indicate the function of a space formed by these walls – yellow for private areas, red for common areas, etc.; a symbolic reason – already fully deictic – that consists of evoking, almost emblematically, the heroic repertoire of neoplasticism and De Stijl, by specifically referring to the pre-transatlantic work of Piet Mondrian.

Confronted with this symbolic evidence within a programmatically functionalist device (although we know that it is impossible to summarise the legacy of Artigas and of Paulista modernism through it), Araujo – whose works are arranged as critical telltales of the formal duplicities and ambiguities of the modern project – turns, arbitrarily, to Goethe, via his famous colour theory. But the arbitrariness of

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the book *El Catafalco de Miranda. Ensayos sobre el arte moderno de la zona tórrida*, by Luis Pérez-Oramas, published with the author's permission.

<sup>2</sup> See Jeff Wall, *Kammerspiel de Dan Graham*, Daled-Goldschmidt, Brussels, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> See Marc Perelman, 'Le stade du verre de l'architecture moderne comme transformateur du moi', in Alain Charre, Marie-Paule MacDonald, Marc Perelman, Dan Graham, *Dis Voir*, Paris, 1995, p. 73.

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that decision – which is not lacking in historical or theoretical sense – is amplified and paradoxically destroyed by Araujo's introduction, together with the diagrammatic references to Goethe's experiments on colour – via Philipp Otto Runge or Johannes Itten – of a pair of dark, sombre scenes. A nocturne that, with its cloudy moon, imposes itself to suggest the imaginary constellation of romanticism, and a painting, masterfully executed and superbly controlled in its radical thematic difference to the rest of the series, in which characters dressed in an old-fashioned nineteenth-century style are plunged into the denseness of a forest of unsettling funereal tones.



As if it were an unexpected narrative mutation, or a sudden shock, as if the expressions that Juan Araujo weaves into the fabric of his paintings, drawings and projections were formed by a kind of sampling and the person doing this sampling skipped something. As if the radio suddenly switched stations or a movement caused the needle playing an old record to jump, an unexpected gear change takes us to this eccentric scene where the reference to Goethe is approached – while at the same time distancing itself – through Faust. However, this is not the Faust of Goethe, but rather its version by the brilliant Russian film-maker Alexander Sokurov. In effect, the scene we mean is a still from Sokurov's film about Faust – a publicity still taken from a simple online search for Faust. In this scene – Araujo has told me – Sokurov has introduced, also arbitrarily, a narrative element that is foreign to Goethe's text. The scene added by Sokurov – again according to Araujo – pertains to a post-funereal moment: Valentine has died, and after his burial Margaret, Faust and Mephistopheles are walking through a forest pondering the medicinal effects of plants. Having reached the mandrake, Margaret questions Faust about his scientific interests, and he replies that what he is really looking for in life is to possess the world order, to turn metal into gold.

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A tacit commentary on the lethal powers of absolute knowledge, on the dangers of the uneasy curiosity of the things that cannot be known<sup>4</sup> – and perhaps on the pharmakon, Socrates would say, which lies in all writing. Such is the alchemical power that Mephistopheles comes to offer Faust: the world order, through a scene that does not exist in Goethe's Faust, which Sokurov introduced in his film version and Juan Araujo reproduced with subtle modifications, consequently moving away from the cinematographic model.

The line of thinking proposed by Jeff Wall regarding the modern transparent house wanders, brilliantly and percussively, through its fundamental iterations: its first manifestation in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe; its deferred manifestation – and as in every deferred action, as in every après-coup – its ideological unveiling in the second glass house by Philip Johnson; finally its true realisation in glass skyscrapers. Wall pauses, then, to understand Dan Graham's gesture, in the ideological implications of the modern, transparent skyscraper: an immense glass column in which the capitalist work force is exposed to the world and from which it dominates it scopically, as if from its transparent height it would be possible to have, through an absolute panoptic effect, precisely, the world order. Accordingly, the Miesian glass house is actually executed as a device – and disseminated – in the glass skyscraper: the emblem and operator of absolute exposure – of transparency – in which the possibility of being exposed to the entire metropolis and the strength of controlling everything like a panoptic Narcissus are negotiated at the same time.

The heart of the matter is, however, that the glass house exposes us and reveals us, and condemns us; the duplicity of the modern project, whose effects are dramatised in the context of Philip Johnson's second glass house, framed by the dense nature of seemingly untouched woods, in a forest-like garden, a funereal Nordic forest similar to the one in Sokurov's scene. There, as Wall points out, the inhabitant is completely exposed to the potential view of someone who is, actually, no one – since the forest is really an immense and protected private property. But at the same time, as soon as night falls in that dense mass of trees and bushes, the inhabitant is confronted with the incessant, inexorable vision of himself and his body in the glass walls, transformed into internal mirrors thanks to the effect of the surrounding darkness. As if the condition of the possibility of a modern subjectivity were absolutely commensurable with the vision in which I expose myself to all, in which everything enters my precincts, in which I am the centre of the prism. Except that, suddenly, in the evening, when darkness falls in the dense Faustian forest where Philip Johnson has erected his deferred memory, his après-coup of the glass house, I only see myself in those black windows, transformed into specular devices of a purely narcissistic void, where the world, everything, fades into a dark night.

This is the action that *Alteration to a Suburban House* reveals: by transforming the façade of an American middle-class modular house into an immense glass wall – by disseminating the glass house through the average modularity of democratic society – and by placing a proportional mirror within the house so that the functions of narcissistic dissemination and concentration mutually cancel one another out. The whole house is nothing more than the reflection of the exterior that inevitably enters it – intimacy destroyed – while the exterior receives, through the specular impulsion of the reflection of those inside, this plundered or sarcastic intimacy is, like a shed skin – like life – sacrificed at the altar of late modernity.

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<sup>4</sup> See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 744-18, Alfaguara, Madrid, 1981, p. 560.



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Some of the works Araujo dedicates to Vilanova Artigas's houses – Segunda casa do arquiteto I or Baeta IX – for me evoke the image (in reality the model) of Alteration to a Suburban House. They show the interior of Baeta House, its neo-plasticist coloured walls, and the large picture window that filters both the light and the tropical nature towards the inside. Another of these works, curiously, shows Artigas's entire house, seen from the outside, presented on back-lit glass, through a dense four-colour overlay that represents the surrounding shrubs, like a primitive sciagraphy, as an image in the form of a shadow on the wall.

The gesture, if not intentional, is crucial. We all know that Vilanova Artigas has not been considered in the lineage of Mies, or in that of the glass house (a lineage that does, however, include Lina Bo Bardi, whose glass house has been explored in some of Araujo's pictorial series). We all know that the legacy of the Paulista modernism that initially emerges from Vilanova Artigas – and in its perhaps deferred manifestation, also in the extraordinary work of his friend and disciple Paulo Mendes da Rocha – does not lie in the transparencies as much as in the shadows. It is characterised by the dense, cool shadows projected by robust and imposing, ever-living structures of cement and exposed reinforced concrete. This resistance to the myth of modern transparency is what makes it particularly significant. Artigas's legacy – especially through its second iteration in Mendes da Rocha (which might seem to suggest a repetition of the Mies-Johnson equation) – is inflected in the massive, incessantly evolving shady density of the reinforced concrete projecting the emphatic shadow that protects us from the intemperance of the tropics. And found in the achromatic opacity of the cement is its sign, its signature (including if it is covered, as in Baeta House or Triangulo House, in modern painting).

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The political power of this architecture – as its creators, including Artigas and Mendes da Rocha, were able to see – offers us the possibility of a protected citizen: well sheltered in its privacy. It is within this architecture that life can finally materialise as a communal need. It is not, then, about the naked unprotected figure, exposed to the open space of history and climates, of statistics and the destructions of a citizen who is prisoner of his own narcissistic fascination, locked up and on show in his impeccable glass cage, just as Dan Graham condemned it in the death throes of conceptualism. However, what social class does Narcissus belong to? What is his place in the world? The Modulor, and all the resources used to imagine an average man, an Everyman, a nameless citizen at the centre of modern transparency – what group does he belong to? What is his sect, his tribe? What is his religion? What family is he from?

Maybe Vilanova Artigas, as a good Marxist, knew something about the pertinence of these questions, so one day he revealed, in his brilliant Residencias Louveiras, the other – antithetical – side of that modern transparency. By simply placing an interlocutor on the other side of the glass, confronting the owners and their servitude, face to face in all their daily activities and even in their dreams, Artigas executed an even more radical gesture than Dan Graham's simple conceptual intention. By throwing the modesty of his middle class in the face of the world in the form of plundering and reflection, Artigas turned the transparency of modern architecture into a form of moral opacity.

Juan Araujo's paintings break down, inflect and reveal these subjects. In them, Goethe's precarious prismatic instruments are set against the density of the tropical forest – which only Humboldt would try to control with his Goethean reason. And just as the large picture windows reveal functional colours, the painting unfolds into its ciphers, into its chromatic registers, into its palettes, to turn the architecture into a window, into a kind of transparency that would be perfect, if not for the traces of a shadow that emerge like inevitable stains, like symptoms, on its surface. An opacity whose peremptory, ephemeral projection will end up grazing the walls of the gallery – and our perception, our memory – drawing there, perhaps, the solitary figure of a question without an answer.

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