Armchair activism
Ben Summers

The relative comfort of our homes and their subtly introduced webcams and microphones offer us the possibility to think freely and broadcast our thoughts to the world; our enjoyment of apparent freedom distracting from the fact that even when we are not speaking we are being heard. It is only when Siri speaks out of turn that she gives the game away.

Critique as understood from its Ancient Greek root ‹kritikē tekhnē› (critical art) has arguably been largely a preserve of the bourgeoisie, and this argument seemed no more apt than in a recent private talk by Benno Tempel (General Director of the Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag) when he suggested that «the gallery is one of the few remaining spaces in contemporary society where the general public is invited to be critical.»[1]

This almost archaic demarcation of a bourgeois public sphere does on the one hand sound plausible, considering the general disenchantment with our current forms of democracy. But on the other hand, isn't everyone welcome to say whatever they want, wherever and whenever they want, even if nobody is listening? The small bubble of invited criticality in the gallery is just one enclosure in a foaming mass of separate spaces that make up the human environment.[2] Built or unbuilt, these physical and social enclosures are sometimes adjacent and often overlapping, each with their own rules and conventions to be adhered to. Their varying conditions of decorum and normality determine how we are most likely to interpret or understand which ‹facts› are true and which are false.

Critique is in itself post-fact (in the sense of coming after the topic of discussion); a construction that responds rather than autonomously generates. So in a post-modern, post-fact reality (in the Trumpian sense), where does critique stand? Critical statements—although often assertively positioned as such—are rarely bare facts but instead a handful of facts mixed with opinions; observations tinged with artistic tendency and poetics. In essence the game of critical conversation is one of improvisation where one must rely on the other players of the game to set the context. Now more than ever, this game of critical debate is open to the average internet user, although the chaotic and impermanent nature of internet culture makes serious and meaningful debate increasingly implausible.

It feels a little too easy to reference Donald Trump's tweets, but their position of poignancy in the fact versus non-fact and public versus private debates makes them difficult to exclude. His widespread success at ignoring facts and getting away with it is impressive to the point of evoking a spontaneous standing ovation. It is the kind of bewildering instant where you are not sure if the game has been won or lost… Are you dreaming or has the world actually just decided that it has been flat all along?

These are the conditions in which contemporary debate takes place; a topsy-turvy arena of critique that one might refer to as the public sphere. However, it is in the removal from the debating

chamber that one finds space to deliberate and form opinion rather than voice it, withdrawing from the necessary presentation of oneself either as a speaker or listener.

Corporate appropriation of the private realm

In her work ‹The Human Condition›, Hannah Arendt understands the home as a private sphere necessary to preserve and rejuvenate the vitality of human life. This process of private rejuvenation, she claims, is so important because it provides respite from the bright and withering light of the public sphere in which one must present oneself to society, understanding the public sphere in the Ancient Greek sense as the political forum where each citizen speaks to and is heard by their peers. In fact, the word private in its Latin origins of ‹privare› means to deprive, and the later iteration ‹privatus› means to be withdrawn from public life, thus it is the ‹deprivation› of public attention that appears as the defining characteristic of life at home.

However, as Arendt goes on to argue, «[i]n our understanding, the dividing line [between public and private] is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping. The scientific thought that corresponds to this development is no longer political science but ‹national economy› or ‹social economy›.»[3]

This assertion of all private interests being analogous to a kind of household administration takes root in the very word company (‹companis›[4]), and such phrases as «men who eat one bread,» and «men who have one bread and one wine». Understanding modern economy as a realm increasingly dominated by private interest, Karl Marx's observation of a «withering away of the state» corresponds directly to the withering away of the public realm, such that in the present situation we are confronted with an ever-increasing conflict of interests where ‹the common good› and the personal profit are practically indiscernible.[5]

To give a recent example, in 2010 the US Supreme Court of Justice upheld the right of corporations to make political donations as a form of lobbying, by attaching the First Amendment (right to free speech) to the Law of Corporate Personhood, saying «Corporations are people, and money is speech»[6].

Mark Cousins proposes an alternative interpretation of the conventional public versus private dichotomy, asserting that perhaps administered versus un-administered space is a more useful ontology.[7] For him, ‹administered space› is a realm where conditions of conduct are impressed upon the individual, thereby dispossessing them of the space. Through this largely social mechanism of ‹normalisation›, standardisation, efficiency and thus homogeneity are established as desirable goals, revoking an alternative view where diversity gives cause for celebration and freedom to be oneself is paramount.

What is clear in either ontological view is that a redefinition of threshold is necessary, in order to shelter the individual once again from constant politicisation, so that the dominant political tools of action (‹praxis›) and speech (‹lexis›) yield, and thus to offer space for the practise of intellection (‹nous›), an act that Aristotle viewed as man's highest capacity.[8]

Whether viewed as unadministered or private space, it is the home that reveals itself as a last bastion of both, preserving the contemplative and critical functions of the individual mind, despite the best attempts of the local municipality to drown the occupants in a deluge of ‹life admin› mail.
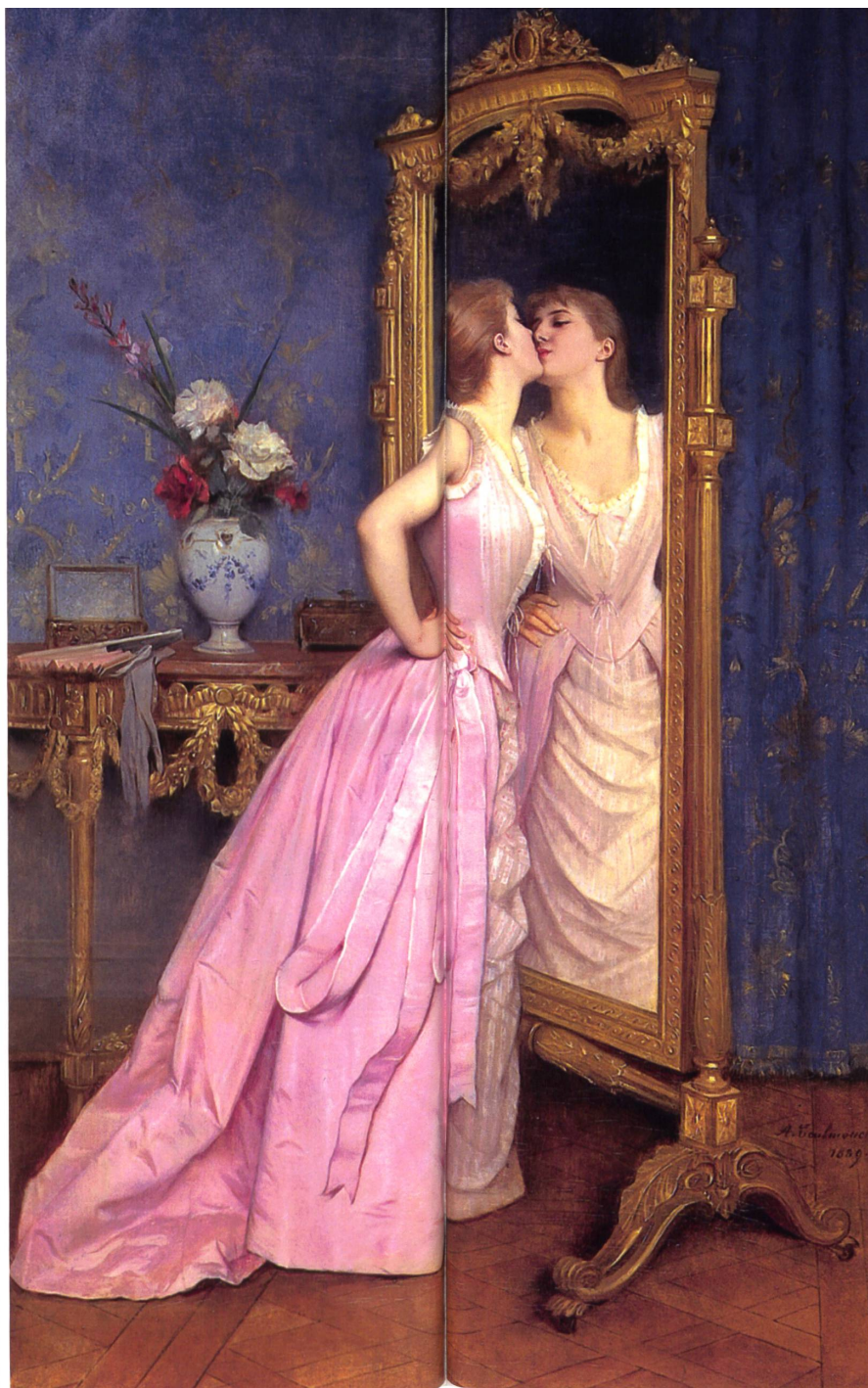

fig.a: Auguste Toulmouche, Vanity, 1890

Virtual apertures: two-way glass or black mirror?

In her study of primitive settlements Julienne Hanson asserts that there is, in fact, a kind of binary elemental state of the building: either closed or open. If the closed cell is the domain of the inhabitant, then the open space is «the locus of the interface between inhabitant and user»[9], defining the home as «a certain ordering of categories, to which is added a system of controls»[10].

In the context of the contemporary home it is clear that the ‹virtual apertures› into the home—which have over time developed from a simple one-way audio connection (radio) to an open audio-visual-textual system (internet)—accentuate now more than ever the virtual capacity to open or close the unit of the residence, acting as a kind of metabolic enclosure. The relative comfort of our homes and their subtly introduced webcams and microphones offer us the possibility to think freely and broadcast our thoughts to the world; our enjoyment of apparent freedom distracting from the fact that even when we are not speaking we are being heard. It is only when Siri speaks out of turn that she gives the game away.

«My house is diaphanous, but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapour. Its walls contract and expand as I desire. At times, I draw them close about me like protective armor … But at others, I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensible.»[11] Georges Spyridaki

It has always been the function of the imported artefact to symbolically link the resident in his home to the outside world, either in the age-old relation to the elements ‹of earth, wind and fire›, or in the 19th century tradition of a cultured collector of icons. But it is only in the last few years that virtual connection has made an adaptable geo-spatial adjacency quite so explicit, close, real-time and adaptive. One thing that links all these iterations of artefacts within the home is their propensity to evoke in the inhabitant both an exploration of the external, and a moment of reflection, a glimpse of self-recognition in the artefact that the individual has chosen in their curation of the interior. It is this duality that Charlie Brooker plays upon in the title of his popular television series ‹Black Mirror›, referencing the capacity of the digital screen (mobile phone, laptop or television) to reflect the countenance of the user, or open a window into a distant world.

Jean Baudrillard's observation of the mirror's disappearance from the modern domestic living space—relegated to the bathroom in frameless form as a functional object—could well be explained by the rise of the virtual aperture. However, while bourgeois décor may have evaporated from the majority of homes, «bourgeois consciousness' cross-eyed view of itself»[12] is far from dissolved. The material-focused culture of the bourgeoisie is in many ways proliferating rather than suffering natural deselection, just as the contemporary individual is not even close to attaining release from existential crisis… Modernity has supposedly evolved into a bigger and better cousin, but there remains a lingering suspicion that in our introverted relationship with ourselves we confuse leaps forward with a Concorde-like crash into our past.

‹Unheimlich› homes

Proclaiming criticality as a human resource retained by domestic enclosure, it makes sense that we should consider the retention of control over our physical boundaries as tantamount to control over our mental boundaries.

The overall point is that without privacy we tend to become overexposed to the light of public attention, a little like a photograph;

losing sight of our own edges. As we live our lives more and more in digital space, it is important that we are aware of the external interest we invite into the very heart of our homes through the delights of predictive services that learn from our habits. On the one hand Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and so on are responding to us, listening to our needs and desires. But on the other hand they are responding according to their parameters alone, shaping us through their suggestions, placing us in isolating spheres of their own choosing. Slowly but surely our range of possible actions (and therefore thoughts) becomes limited to those suggestions, until we are no more than actors in centrally scripted narratives.

For all its homely comforts and stable appearances the home is in a precarious position, and as architects we have to engage in the battle to retain—or even reclaim—it as a sanctuary, as a place of mental as well as physical shelter. Perhaps, in consideration of the arguments outlined, it might be a case of designing a place of residence that more thoroughly inverts the atmosphere ‹against› the flow of a public life indoctrinated by the private interest. Or at least this appears to be the solution in respect to today's conditions, where we are increasingly encouraged to feel at home at work; where corporate mentality is the only mentality; where business knows our pleasures. The solution is to make our homes ‹unheimlich›[13], render ourselves not ‹homeless› but still displaced; necessarily delirious and invisible so that we might best rediscover our security.

In the words of Constant Nieuwenhuys, «it is vital that ‹normal› behavioural patterns be interrupted, that a short circuit should occur between ‹daily habits› and an environment so designed as to exclude all compulsive behaviour from the outset, in other words, a ‹disorienting environment›[14]. Within this disorienting environment, «‹straying› [would] no longer have the negative sense of ‹getting lost›, but the more positive sense of discovering new paths»[15].

In a bizarre turn of events it seems we have ended up arguing for a return to one or more of the various modernist failures, creating disconcerting dwellings and pulling apart work and living in the functionalist sensibility; a kind of riff on J. G. Ballard's ‹High-Rise›. Not, of course, because it seems like a genuinely good idea… But because it feels like otherwise we are destined to drift through life in a state of reverie, never-endingly tumbling from one nightmare to another. We are so embedded in the various spiders' webs of human constructions, so deeply conditioned by society and the various ideas of what is ‹normal› and what is ‹appropriate› that it has become increasingly difficult to determine which way is up. At the root of it all is a deep-seated unwillingness to be critical in our thinking, and I'll be damned if the anarchist in me should succumb to slumber in my armchair.

1   Private talk by Benno Tempel for TU Delft students participating in a Methods & Analysis workshop with Anne Lacaton at Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, February 2017.
2   Peter Sloterdijk, Bubbles: Microspherology, 2011, p.28.
3   Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 1958, p.28.
4   ‹Companis› is derived from the Latin words for together (‹com›) and bread (‹panis›), relating more strongly to the military or theatrical application of ‹company› than the more widely used legal-commercial term.
5   Ibid, p.60.
6   A company is called a ‹corporate›. The Latin word ‹corpus› means ‹body› in English. A corporation is thus a ‹legal person› created by means other than human birth.
7   Mark Cousins, ‹The Joylessness of Administered Space›, in: Fulcrum #4, February 16, 2011.
8   Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics; Book X. Chapter 7, Section 7.
9   Julienne Hanson, Decoding Homes and Houses, 1998, p.6.
10 Ibid, p.7.
11 Georges Spyridaki, ‹Mort lucide›, 1953, p.35.
12 Jean Baudrillard, ‹The System of Objects›, 1996, p.23.
13 ‹Unheimlich› as the linguistic echo of the English antonym to homely: ‹unhomely› but also uncanny; perturbing.
14 Constant Nieuwenhuys, ‹The Principle of Disorientation›, 1974.
15 Ibid.

fig.b: Caruso St John, Brick House, London, 2001–2005. Fotografie: Hélène Binet