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«It is fateful and ironic how the lie we need in order to live dooms us to a life that is never really ours.»
— Ernst Becher

HOME ALTARS LTE

Will Fu

Will Fu, born 1994, holds a M.Arch from Princeton and a B.AS from the University of Waterloo. His writings, illustrations and animations have recently been published in POOL, Scroope, and exhibited at the Sao Paulo Architecture Biennale, and the AA. Will is interested in the capacity for the rituals, elements, technologies and spaces in the domestic sphere to tell old and new stories alike. He is currently an Intern Architect at Shape Architecture, with previous experiences at MPdL studio, Johnston Marklee, and BIG.

Equipped with purchasing power, we live today with an intense self-intoxication for life and, in turn, lead the most boring of lives. Everywhere we turn, the commodification of life marks permanent real estate in our psyche. Lifestyle products, nutrition logistics, disciplined diets, and anti-aging technologies point to a modern project bent on the utter eradication of death itself. Our positivist techno-determinist society sees death as a mere negation — the absence of life. As Foucault would claim that a mad society banishes the mad, here, a dead society banishes the dead; stripped of all symbolic and social participation, and spatially ghettoized to our city outskirts.⁽¹⁾

In pre-Capitalist societies, death was considered a mere state of transition as natural as the changing qualities of matter. The dead were folded into the social discourse of daily life and sought for their experiences and wisdom. During the Middle Ages, the cemetery would sit in the town center, effectively functioning as a public forum.⁽²⁾ Divergent from the somber vacant cemeteries of today, the medieval cemetery was a forum of lively diverse activity, where members of the parish and town conducted business, played games, fell in love, and carried on with their daily routines in and around the dead. On the grounds of God, both the living and the dead rested in peace, suspended in a temporal state from the outside world. Death in the community was seen as an opportunity to exercise a kind of symbolic labor, where mourning together warded off the presence of outside evil and repaired the bonds of the community.

Western modernity today centers on the dissipation of collective action towards a curated proliferation of the self. This process of atomization feeds into a simple structure to extend life as much as possible to maximize production; and since the dead can no longer work or produce capital, «[...] our dead are thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a role to play.»⁽³⁾ Discussions in and around death are considered taboo, quiet personal affairs, and its rituals highly personalized and diffused. With secularization and our devotion to accumulation, we no longer view death as a passage but as a Robin Hood figure that robs our social status by severing our ties to profits, commodities, and assets. However, in the comfort of one's domestic sphere our last sanctuary for death practices resides in our homes, a safe space where interactions with the dead weave seamlessly with daily life and supplement our connection to ourselves and the outside world. This has traditionally been done with home altars, a general term for a religious shrine or memorial that vary across different religious affiliations and cultures, each carrying a strict set of rituals, items, and symbolic specificity. Two examples are used to commend the home altar as a persisting monument, a beacon in the home that channels spatial, symbolic and collectivist action. The Catholic Icon corner is a spatial apparatus that evoke Minimalist Art vocations, while the vigilant, routine maintenance of the Butsudan promotes a multisensorial engagement that subvert traditional notions of use, exchange, and symbolic value.

Perched between two walls sits an altar common in the homes of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox families. The icon corner is a small worship space that serves as a reservoir for daily prayer and a point of attraction for guests alike. Back when a Christian minority would convene privately for prayer, the home was conceptualized as a microcosmic church, the icon corner its central altar, and the parents the clergy. This small arrangement fulfills the obligations of consistent prayer, where liturgy and private devotion enveloped seamlessly by occupying a prominent position in one's home. The icon corner carries with it strict rules of arrangement. It must face East like Churches, put in a highly visible place so that it greets guests when they first enter the home, and as the name suggests, be in the corner of an important room to create a concentrated prayer environment that blocks out all other distractions. The altar is composed of three main icons, with the cross in the center hugged by an image of the Virgin Mary to the left and an image of Christ to the right. Smaller icons of the Saints surround the trio, functioning like a supporting ensemble arranged with a sense of hierarchy (smaller in size) and symmetry in mind (where asymmetry is believed to promote distraction and imbalance). Common objects like candles, perishables, and holiday items pepper along with other devotional objects, like prayer books and bibles join an assembly where daily upkeep serve as constant moments of engagement with faith and the remembrance.

If we look at this painting by Ivan Petrovich Volski titled «A Russian living room with an icon corner»^(fig. a) we see how an icon corner functions as an anchor of spiritual significance, which mobilizes part-to-part relations to produce a contradictory whole. This icon corner announces a series of thresholds, starting with a white stone altar covered in white cloth which stands in stark contrast to the lavishly rich ornamentation of the reading room. The wooden encasement creates an inner sanctum of the most privileged artifacts illuminated by a suspended oil lamp while a blanket of outer icons suggests an impending invasion towards the rest of the room. The sheer density of these sacred images produces a cloud of visual noise, inviting family members and guests for a closer look. The icons span out at eye level wrapping the peripheral vision of a praying subject into an immersive microcosm of reflection. This solid base then dissipates towards the top, where icon images decrease in size and become more sparsely arranged, suggesting a kind of dematerialization from one realm to the next. In the 0,10 Exhibition of 1916, Malevich suspended his «Black Square» painting on the corner, to make a direct nod to the Red Corner (Icon corner of Russian Orthodoxy) that would sit in a traditional Russian home, imbuing his Suprematist movement with spiritual significance. The Black Square would go on to be Malevich's signature motif — an icon that operated as his abstract double. When he passed, a flag with the Black Square was fixed on his coffin and continues to mark his grave, floating like a personalized halo. The correlation between the icon corner and early Modern Art rests in the way both command spatial effects and social theatics independent from the given room. The way the



(fig. a) Ivan Petrovich Volski, A Russian Living Room with an Icon Corner, n.d. (c. 1850). Image: Wikigallery



(fig. b) Saito Hiroshi, Butsudan Boys, 2018.
Image: Kyoto Journal

icon corner works are compatible with Robert Morris's reflection of Minimalist sculpture as a «kind of faith in spatial extension and a visualization of that extension.»⁽⁴⁾ Sculpture for Morris is a distinct scale between monument and ornament, that takes on qualities of space, light, and materials in a visceral, concrete way which work together to «reduce the public, external quality of the object and tends to eliminate the viewer to the degree that these details pull him into intimate relation with the work and out of the space in which the object exists.»⁽⁵⁾ This partnership between assemblage and ritual is a crucial quality in both home altars and minimalist sculpture; the sculpture turns the default white cube into a focused attentive interrogation of form and materiality while the home alter turns mundane objects in a domestic space into an affective zone of social routine. Michael Fried identifies this dependency of Minimalist Art on an audience to be theatrical and impure for its lack of autonomy. He labels the minimalist work as Literalist Art — «an object in a situation [...] that virtually by definition includes the beholder.»⁽⁶⁾ This complicity with factors outside of the artwork's control, however, should be seen as a conscious strength for its ability to petition for continued engagement. This is especially true with the icon corner, where the mobilization of a distinct set of objects ripple into a wider consequence of social and aesthetic experience. The economy of symbolic effects actively rescripts existing notions of use-value within these associated objects. From merely putting these objects in relation through a specific set of actions, a lit cheap candle turns into a sign of fervent devotion, and a prayer book becomes the ammunition for a continued conversation with the deceased, saints, and the capital G.

Recessed into a comfortable niche inside a traditional Japanese home, sits a cabinet that houses a temple and a mountain. The inside of the Butsudan represents a miniature double of the local Buddhist temple hall where the family's ancestors are believed to reside, turning the cabinet into a sacred site of exchange. The cabinet commonly resides in a custom niche in the family's home, taking root as a quiet observer of daily domestic routines. Three platforms in the Butsudan hold various relics, objects, and offerings. A Honzon (statue of Buddha or a Mantra scroll) is placed on-center with older Ihai (tablets engraved with the names of the deceased) on the right side and newer tablets on the left. The second shelf offers space to a candle holder, incense holder, and flower pot, while the lowest shelf holds objects used on a daily basis such as a bell, sutra book, and just rosary beads. In front are offerings placed in specific containers. The worship sequence is outlined below:

- 1 Place offerings of rice, water, tea
- 2 Straighten posture and look to Buddha
- 3 Regulate breathing and calm down
- 4 Light candles and incense and hold up the incense
- 5 Strike the bell three times
- 6 Hand in Gassho (a praying position where one sits upright with hands together) and bow once

7 Chant (homage to Budda)
8 Bow one more time with hands in *gasshō*⁽⁷⁾

The objects that facilitate the life of the Butsudan become what Bernard Steigler would categorize as memory aids that stimulates labor that produce social value rather than capital. These mnemonic tools become extensions of one's body, breaking down object-subject boundaries and helping participants remember the gestures required to communicate and honor the dead. In this way, the butsudan could be conceptually thought of as a space of recollection, a cabinet of curiosities where objects collected and ordered are symbolically activated by a scripted dance with one's ancestors. As a site of memory, these storage devices are «mixed, hybrid, mutant, and bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile.»⁽⁸⁾

Between these blurred lines, the spiritual role of the Butsudan has recently been called into question as changing laws, and family structure have agitated the altar's traditional central position in the household. We see this tension most evidently in Saito Hiroshi's «Portraits of Eldest Sons» (fig. b) where the photographer and his other friends are pictured in front of their family's home altar. Conservative attitudes towards gender roles dictates that the eldest son of the family inherits the family home and with it the custodian duties of maintaining the family altar. As these young men come of age, they wrestle with this tension between family obligation and individual ambition which we see in the portrait series where casually dressed sons sit shoulder-
ing the visual weight of the past behind them feel uneasy with their backs turned to the family altar. The «value of the household guaranteed that the deceased would become the household ancestor — provide comfort to the living who will someday become ancestors and live on in the rites throughout the ensuing generation» assured strong family ties and succession of one's household in both symbolic and material assets.⁽⁹⁾ This is reflected in inheritance tax laws which wave assets for religious services including the butsudan due to its designation as public property. With the Post-War Civil Code, inheritance and ancestral worship was separated into different categories to an attempt to address gender discrimination in inheritance traditions. Rather than seen as a means to procure and maintain economic estates, the obligations to care for the deceased became less about duties and more to do with personalized reverence. Butsudans today can be complex gadgets, electronically charged with automated doors, light sensors, touch screens, and Wi-Fi capabilities. The funerary industry leans on convenience to market these hybrid Butsudans as compact, low-cost, and mobile alternatives that suit the itinerant cosmopolitan citizen.

IV PARANORMAL OBJECTS

Hybrid death altars are not just a recent phenomenon augmented by telecommunication technologies but rather a reflection of a persisting curiosity between media and faith. The Spiritualists of the 19th century believed that the dead

could communicate with the living where «the telegraph itself was an inspiration from the spirit world, a gift presented to humankind in order to facilitate communication among the living and the dead.»⁽¹⁰⁾ The registration of dots and dashes across vast distances were understood to be media traces to and back from the spirit realm while radio messages were thought to be tampered with by spirits as it traveled through the air. As our lives become increasingly entangled with digital platforms, our loved ones inherit a great deal of digital possessions. From online avatars to photos, videos, and emails, issues around privacy and management become increasingly pertinent topics in the funeral industry. Within the sphere of online commemorations, privatized mourning becomes an expanded public affair. Online platforms extend the dead's social, temporal, and spatial influence, and allow public commemoration to be carried out within the privacy of one's home. This inversion enables new forms of reverence to take place on memorial websites that offer an accessible platform turning tragedy into an ongoing conversation. However, whether it is an online website, or home altar, death exists as an abstract concept inherently tied to a physical material phenomenon and with it a dependency of physical infrastructures and things that tie digital media's immaterial elements of symbols, iconography, and aesthetics to glass, silicone, plastics, and the laws of physics and chemistry.⁽¹¹⁾ If we consider the life cycle of materials, the vibrant diversity of metals, woods, light, and perishables in the home altar coexist in the same way as a digital memorial is a site of both electronic, material, and digital resource that grows obsolete at differing rates. These disparate rates of deterioration promote constant engagement and a planned opportunity for home altars to adapt to changing cultures, sensibilities, and routines. An example of a hybrid memorial is *Thanato Fenestra* by Daisuke Uriu; a mirror, photo frame, and candleholder interconnected by sensors. The square and circular shape of these artifacts take symbolic cues from Buddhism and are made of a familiar warm wood material. When the candle is lit, the photo frame turns on and filters through a slideshow while the one-way mirror swaps for a photo of the deceased. As daily companions to their own particular demands and expressions, these hybrid objects provide for us with a direct connection with our living and passed loved ones; reminding us of a larger network of collective agency out there in the world that we can depend on.

V

PRAYER POINTS

In the face of a modern world eager to mobilize cloning, biotechnology, and chemistry to cancel death itself, there is a growing revolution of sensible objects within the home that quietly remind us that death on the contrary colors life with meaning. Without it, our personal projects and social connections lose all agency. Our death drive towards unmanageable production and accumulation leaves no room in the home and the mind to honor the collective efforts of the past. Our homes become increasingly filled with generic products, and smart technologies, leaving our most cherished and routinely used spaces barren and vacant of symbolism. These objects may hold high monetary value and scientific intricacies but have lost all spiritual enchantment

and compatibility. Electronic home altars update traditional death rituals enhancing the agency of the dead in everyday life, as active actors to remind a society that is becoming increasingly calculated, secularized, and commodified. In the foreword for «the Architecture of Frank Gehry» Henry Cobb states that «architecture is an art of indirection: That is to say the architect does not make the building, but rather makes an elaborate set of instructions that direct the work of many others who actually make the building.»⁽¹²⁾ Perhaps the home altar could be argued as a form of indirection; a set of evolving practices activated by complex functionally and symbolically charged objects as a means to meaningfully tackle large existential questions with support from a digital, living, and spiritual collective.