

Detached Dwellings

That there are different names for different types of dwellings is something I've learned since moving to the Netherlands. For instance: a *twee-onder-een-kapwoning* (a semi-detached house), or a *rijtjeshuis* (a terrace house). What seems like forever ago, on October 6th, I was in a building in Aerdenhout—in a house converted into a part-time gallery/collection called April in Paris—to visit an exhibition. I say building, because I didn't initially know what to call this particular building. First I called it a villa, but then someone corrected me that it was more of a mansion. Seeing as I know little about names for houses—in Turkey people colloquially mostly acknowledge the existence of two: apartment or house—I cannot say with certainty that that's not an exaggeration.

It was on the corner of a street so wide that it felt for a second like I wasn't in the Netherlands. I followed a little stone pathway towards a beautiful door and entered the big house. Fittingly, the *big* house had a backyard so large that if I kicked a ball from its terrace towards its surrounding walls, I probably wouldn't walk all that way to fetch it. From a, you guessed it, large kitchen, which I peered at only from a distance, came snacks (small pizza rolls) wine and beer. It wasn't too atypical an opening event. There was a blue couch that was nearly impossible to ignore, in the living room where the works of the exhibition were placed. Some guesses were made about its value in hushed voices. Adjacent, there was a separate room that had other artworks on the walls—not belonging to the exhibition I was there to visit, but which I recognized, because I had previously seen them on the gallery's website as part of the owners' collection. Were these also for sale?



Ceremonial Weight, installation view, 2024. Photo: Gunnar Meier.

I was there for a few hours. The hosts seemed very friendly. Most people were chipper and indulged in small talk. Directors of respectable museums and residencies arrived. The curator and the artists gave a tour. I overheard someone say that they love the Rijksakademie, they love supporting it, and they are friends with a Brazilian gallery, so did the other person want free tickets to an event at Art Basel Paris? The other person said, no, they already have tickets for everything, but let's meet for brunch?

I caught up with some friends and then drove back to Amsterdam. In the time that passed, I thought about the exhibition. Inspired by a poem by Michael D. Snediker, which also lends the exhibition its title, "Ceremonial Weight" groups

together works by three international artists. Notably, all but one were wall works—many paintings, two assemblages and a sculpture on a curved and rounded table. Verdict? I liked the works, but ultimately I thought it was a stretch to group them together with the conviction that proposed this poem as its uniting or galvanizing force, since the concepts and affects derived from it—such as domesticity and personhood—seemed tentative and trivializing, especially when placed in this particular context, this big house, which felt rather alien to the delicate curatorial proposition of it as host or container.



Ceremonial Weight, installation view, 2024. Photo: Gunnar Meier.

The issue lies not in whether the works were convincingly "together". Rather, I surmised a possible lack of consideration, or a simple oversight when it came to the context, the surroundings, that ended up overpowering a line of thought—particularly so, when that line of thought was held together by poetic association, an inherently tenuous thread (I mean this positively). The interrelations that were introduced streamed like a river through the press text: the life source is a poem

that flows into one of the artist's work, which then flows into how that particular artist's work relates to a small detail in one of another artist's work, so on and so forth. But even as I did my best and started to see a glimpse of "the correspondence of scales, both in terms of violence on the world's stage and between individuals" reflected back in the works, the house as the container, as the body of water hugged by its shores, dammed that.¹ This was not only a money issue; it was not because the house was very lavish, but because its presence was so impossible to overlook that it ended up functioning like a quasi-artwork in the exhibition, demanding attention but failing to ultimately sediment.

Louise Lawler has shown me that art lives on after an exhibition and sometimes ends up in institutional or private collections in the most awkward of places.² If you have already asked yourself why I am so obsessed with *where* the works are placed (the exhibition is up until January 6th, 2025) ... well, one literally couldn't see two individual works together without also seeing a big and expensive piece of furniture and/or the giant lawn stretching out behind. So, calling it simply a domestic context, "a home for art that emphasizes community, family, and friendship" felt misplaced.³

1. The press release of "Ceremonial Weight", also references Michael D. Snediker's poem. See: <https://www.aprilinparisfinearts.com/projects/ceremonial-weight-y-malik-jalal-behrang-karimi-ruoru-mou/>, retrieved October 15, 2024.

2. Lawler established her signature style in the early 1980s, when she began taking pictures of other artists' works displayed in museums, storage spaces, auction houses and collectors' homes. With these photographs, she sought to question the value, meaning and use of art. See further: | <https://www.moma.org/artists/7928>.

3. Actually, the press release calls it a "unique domestic context", and while there is perhaps nothing unique about a mansion by itself—as I believe many mansions probably look alike—it is maybe unique in the Netherlands to have a collector's home as a gallery where shows are being put on.



Ceremonial Weight, installation view, 2024. Photo: Gunnar Meier.

Because how does it actually do that, besides being a house that people actually reside in? Perhaps the collector context is not so out of place in a metropolis, but the lack of a high functioning commercial market in the Netherlands limits the likelihood of us artist- and writer- types ending up at these kinds of mansion-galleries, or simply even inside the homes of collectors full stop. However, my bewilderment was not limited to the novelty of this experience, it was rather that the exhibition seemed to hope that I either ignore the space in which it took place, or that I believe that domesticity functions as some kind of overarching force. While this might be so technically, I was just not totally convinced that the domesticity mentioned in the press text as the umbrella relation between the works, was the same kind of domesticity present in the artists' works, and, by extension, within the house itself. I mean, the works all actually do, more or less, reference a kind of domesticity—from the Southern United States to Iran by way of depictions of Persian culture to the Chinese workers in high-end fashion factories in Italy—but, the elephant in the room remains the room itself, you know?

I'm not saying every exhibition in this mansion-gallery should be in one way or another *about* it, but, then again why not? I think didacticism gets a bad rep. I thought it was a mistake to turn away from the complicated connotations hanging heavily in the suburban air: the closed circuit of transaction, of it being

a gallery and a collection simultaneously, of selling *and* buying, because by negating that, "Ceremonial Weight" indirectly focused on the reaffirmed definition of its transactional value. Instead of seeing an exhibition, I could only see whatever the opposite of that might be: a show that was already over and works that were already acquired and already at home, hung on a wall.

I often try to forget that art is for sale in galleries, and that it might end up in places where artists, who have given up ownership, are hoping the work will

be treated with dignity, by which I mean, let's say a work about the ecological devastation brought on by fracking doesn't end up donning the walls of Shell B.V. Headquarters. I'm exaggerating to make a point, but you get it. Like, imagine if someone bought your pet donkey and ate it. And if I do that, which is naive on my part, admittedly, it is because I want to see works that relate to each other considered in the totality of an exhibition as a form instead of looking at individual works (with price tags). And not that every art space needs to be neutral (I mean which one is, really), but it felt as if by being shown in this particular house and with seemingly little regard to its "unique domestic context" and how it molds them, the works surrendered their ability to create the conditions for their reception.

And I know, with the (growing) scarcity of exhibition spaces and capital, with our lives governed by the precarity of freelancing, with the Post-Fordist exploitations of ourselves, etc., it is difficult as artists and curators to do justice to site-specificity with the little resources we have.⁴ Yet within this, something else should be possible. When a curator visits an artist's studio to see work, the rest of the studio mess belongs to that context, and so if the artist says "just ignore the pile of materials and the four different make-shift ashtrays", that's usually done to ease a sense of embarrassment on behalf of the artist, but I would argue, at least tonally, it is noted. And why should one ignore this? I thought context was undetachable from content. As I said before, not every work in this house needs to be about this house—just as all the works in the collection of a legal office don't need to be about justice. Sometimes exhibitions are a labor of love or odes to conceptual or poetic obsessions that are cultivated over long periods of time, but if this was that, the grandeur of the space seemed to efface the gesture.

The previous show, called "Conduit House" (also curated by Jennifer Teets), seemed to do a better job at responding to the space and constructing itself around the notion of a dwelling. However tenuous some works in that exhibition

2. Particularly in the Randstad, which includes Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Rotterdam, most places such as P////AKT and BAK are currently under threat of closing their doors. Kunstverein in Amsterdam has already closed.



Ceremonial Weight, installation view, 2024. Photo: Gunnar Meier.

seemed in responding specifically to the curatorial concept, there appeared to be a more direct acknowledgment of this context. And I get that you cannot keep doing the same show over and over again, but in return, "Ceremonial Weight" felt like a negotiation between the works and everything in between the walls of its exhibition space; it asked its viewers for an attention to poetics so sharp that they should, with some effort, be able focus fully on it within this delicate landscape, all the while ignoring the strong wind blowing through it.

by Artun Alaska Arasli