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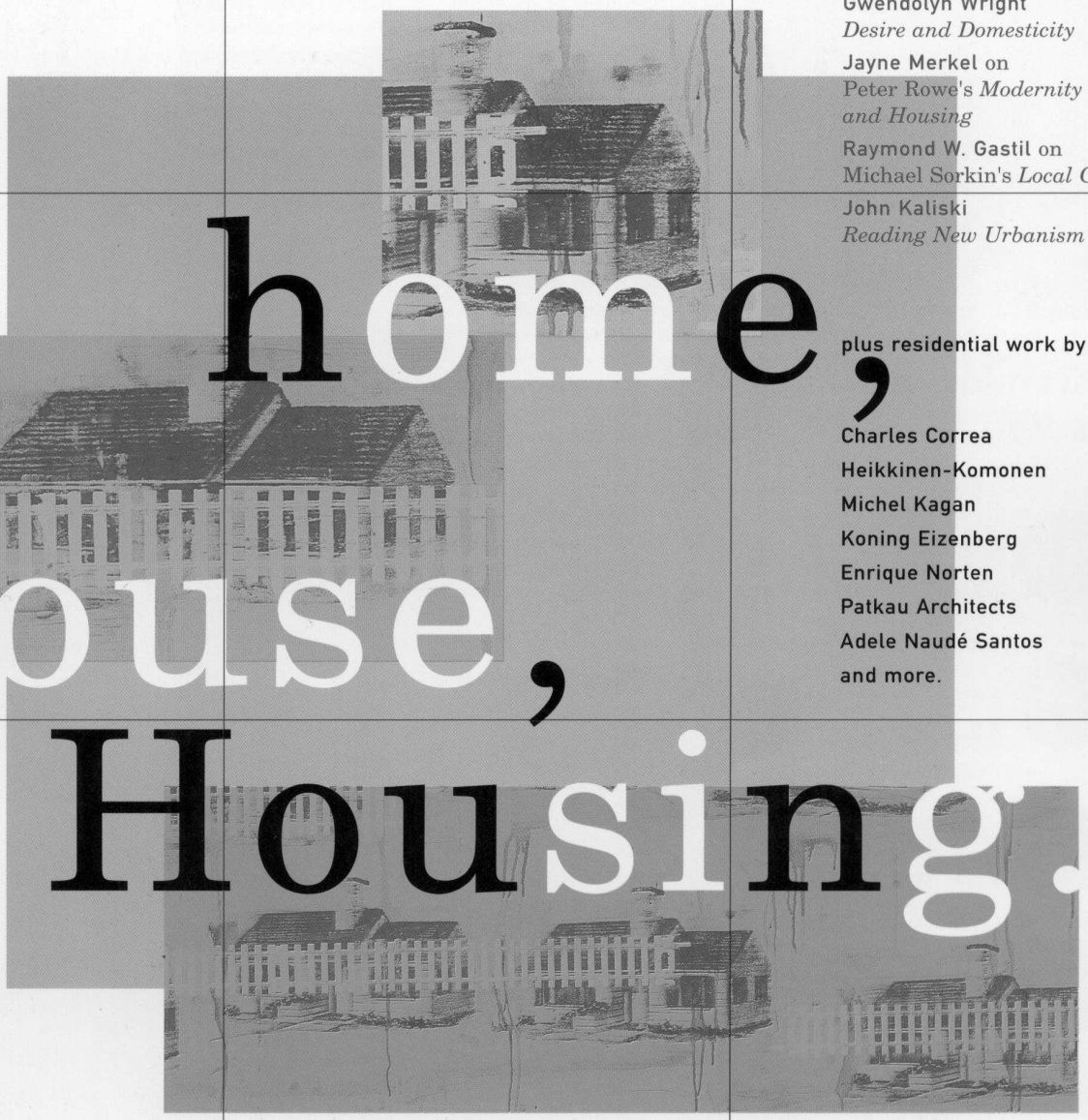

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Art, Class, and Home

ANNMARIE ADAMS

INSIDE CULTURE: ART AND CLASS IN THE AMERICAN HOME, David Halle, University of Chicago Press, 1993, 261 pp., illus., $29.95.

Did you ever wonder what the cluster of baby photos on your mother's night table says about her self-image? Why your free-thinking friends are so obsessed with African masks? Or why it has suddenly become difficult to find good reproductions (especially full scale) of Leonardo's *Last Supper*? David Halle's *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* offers answers to these and other contemporary cultural queries by exploring the images that adorns the walls, tabletops, and bookshelves of the American home.

Halle, a sociologist at SUNY-Stony Brook and the University of California, Los Angeles, bravely takes on the intelligentsia of art history and cultural theory in this book, arguing that the home and its occupants—ordinary people—have had as much to do with the development of art in this century as famous artists, academic scholarship, and museums. Through detailed interviews with 160 households in four neighborhoods in New York City and Long Island, Halle explores the relationship between social class and the sorts of things people typically display in their private rooms, such as paintings, prints, sculpture, family photographs, and religious figures. The neighborhoods range from "urban upper-middle class" to "suburban working class."

Halle's interpretation of his data takes direct aim at three mainstays of cultural theory: first, he describes as no less than "scandalous" the notion articulated by Thorstein Veblen in 1899 and extended by others, that art functions as a status symbol in society. From the perspective of a social scientist, Halle sees this "status striving" theory as seriously lacking in evidence. Second, he attempts to discredit the theory advanced by the Frankfurt School as early as the 1930s, that images of mass or pop culture are means by which large corporations (via the advertising industry) dominate and repress the public. Halle claims that this theory ignores the unique "meaning" that works of art hold for different individuals. Finally, Halle takes to task the theory of "art as cultural capital," which purports that high culture plays a central role in reinforcing and perpetuating the two-part class structure of the dominant and the dominated. This notion, associated primarily with Pierre Bordieu and Paul DiMaggio, is predicated on the belief that an appreciation of art is a learned, or acquired, capacity (cultural capital), passed on through an elitist educational system and the socialization of wealthy families. Followers of this school of thinking stress that the poor have no opportunity to appreciate the high arts. In this case, Halle does not dispute that the American working class has limited access to the arts, but he does suggest that very few members of the dominant class actually care about culture at all.

Large displays of photographs of family members are common throughout the homes of the middle and working classes, as this den of a Manhattan house illustrates. Halle contrasts this with the minority of the Manhattan sample which believes that family photos are not art and must therefore be confined to albums. (From *Art and Class in the American Home.*)

Halle presents his research in six thematic chapters; in each, a study of "context" illuminates the flaws in the above-mentioned cultural theories. Unfortunately, he seems completely unaware of changes in the fields of art and architectural history over the last twenty or thirty years. The focus of scholars has shifted from an almost exclusive preoccupation with form and intention to an increased awareness of the ways in which works of art and architecture function in a larger cultural arena. Even more egregious, however, is the fact that Halle seems oblivious to the whole field of material culture, whose basis is precisely what he has taken on in his book. In more than 250 pages of counterargument with outdated theories of cultural history, there is not a single mention of the "new" understanding of the home as revolutionized by institutions such as the Winterthur Museum, the rise of vernacular architecture studies, and the material culture courses now a standard part of university curricula. He makes no reference to the interdisciplinary scholarship that considers "cultural context," published in journals such as the *Winterthur Portfolio, Material Culture,* and *Material History Review.* In calling for

Religious figures displayed in the bedroom of a sixty-year-old bachelor, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a working and lower-middle-class urban neighborhood. This grouping is an exact reconstruction of the way his mother displayed the figurines in her bedroom. From left: Madonna, St. Anthony, baby Jesus, St. Patrick, Madonna, St. John the Baptist, Joseph, and the Infant Jesus of Prague. (From *Art and Class in the American Home.*)

a "materialist approach" to the study of home, Halle appears oblivious to the work of Elizabeth Cromley, Henry Glassie, Dolores Hayden, Bernard Herman, J. B. Jackson, Gwendolyn Wright, and others.

In addition to this shortcoming, his explanations of Americans' preference for certain images and objects seem somehow unconnected to or insufficiently supported by the elaborate quantitative analyses that pervade *Inside Culture*. Halle suggests, for example, that Americans like landscape paintings because their imagery compensates for the chaos of contemporary urban life; that the ways in which people arrange family photographs, in clusters of framed prints, reflect the fragility of the nuclear family today (i.e., members can be removed, divorced, substituted); and that Democrats display African masks with respect while Republicans present them with derision, demonstrating varying levels of acceptance of African-Americans according to the political bias of the individual. In the chapter on religious iconography, the author notes that the Virgin Mary is typically depicted from the waist up, a portrayal that de-emphasizes her virginity by avoiding her reproductive organs.

Halle's assertions, though entertaining, are purely speculative and have no obvious relation to the book's more than thirty tables concatenating class and culture. I was left wondering, for example, whether rural home owners were equally fond of landscape painting; whether the popularity of portable photo frames could be equally tied to the development of plastics or the penchant of Americans to move frequently; and why African masks are also popular in countries with relatively small black populations, such as Sweden, Canada, and England.

In chapter six, "The Truncated Madonna and Other Modern Catholic Iconography," for example, Halle refers to three such tables in which social class is factored against the religious orientation of the household, the number of Catholic homes displaying religious items, and the content of the religious imagery, respectively. (Halle's categories for the imagery are amusing in themselves: Mary, "truncated" or "full-length"; Jesus, "as a man," "crucified," "Sacred Heart," "as a boy," "as a baby," "other"; Saints; the Pope.) But how do these distributions explain the disappearance of Mary's genitalia? In one of the author's rare nods to gender, he attributes the disappearance of da Vinci's *Last Supper* from Catholic dining rooms to the fact that women no longer wait on men at home and thus are less interested in men-only eating scenes. While some of Halle's speculations are insightful (though never substantiated), this one made me groan.

Despite these criticisms, *Inside Culture* may be useful in many respects to scholars engaged in the material world of family life. Perhaps its most important contribution is that it makes a strong case for studying the consumers—not just the producers—of culture. Some scholars have suggested this same reform for architectural history, recognizing that it is essential to include in our historical record those who commission, inhabit, transform, and demolish buildings, because they, too, make informed and influential decisions about the city. Bestowing this agency upon the consumers of culture is an essential tenet of material culture studies. In addition, Halle's rigorous sociological studies of the frequency of certain images in the home, although never restricted to any time frame, may inspire more architecture scholars to look at contemporary home life. Even today, many architectural historians use Edward Laumann and James House's classic 1970 study of the furnishings of living rooms and social class as a model sociological approach to examine the domestic realm. Another virtue of *Inside Culture* is its inclusion of more than ninety photographs and illustrations of real houses. While the measured drawings are rather amateurish, the black and white photographs are clear and well chosen, providing rare glimpses into the homes of a range of Americans today.

In his conclusion, Halle anticipates critics who may decry the narrowness of his sample (neighborhoods clustered around New York) and his privileging of some themes over others. New Yorkers, after all, may be more interested in art and culture than people in other urban areas. However, Halle challenges would-be critics to go out and gather evidence from other places themselves—a response that is characteristic of the brazen style that permeates this daring effort.

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