

MONIKA EMMANUELLE KAZI: HOMES LESS, HOME SPELLS

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When we return to our apartment after several weeks of travel, our three-month-old baby looks around, wide eyed, examines the objects in the living room, and responds attentively to all the familiar noises: the closet door, the noise of wheels when his little bed is rolled over the parquet floor, the toilet flushing, the neighbors on the other side of the walls. He recognizes, relaxes, and smiles. Feeling at home ideally means finding security and well-being, a haven of peace.

But what is “home” exactly? According to Emanuele Coccia in his *Philosophy of the Home*, it is far from being defined by architecture alone, and no more is it anchored in a specific terrain. On the contrary, it’s not our own four walls, but what they contain, that makes a place livable and brings it to life: the objects we surround ourselves with is what makes us feel “at home.” “Living does not mean being surrounded by something or occupying a certain portion of terrestrial space. It means interweaving a highly intense relationship with certain things and certain people to make our happiness and our breath inseparable.” (Coccia, 13)

This definition is the polar opposite of the prevailing values on today’s real estate market. There, finance capitalism is a system of investment, exchange, and profiteering powered by transactions in luxury real estate, even though projects of that sort may not see the light of day for decades. But what are we buying or selling, if not a slice of sky, when the deal is the 30th floor of a skyscraper yet to be built? By speculating in hypothetical properties, finance capitalism paradoxically transforms real estate—traditionally a local, immobile commodity—into its very antithesis, namely a global (financial) liquidity. Very often these, in social terms, quite superfluous residential developments remain vacant, despite being stylishly furnished and equipped with top-notch services. Owning a condo of this kind has nothing to do with the desire for a home, but is purely a matter of prestige, an add-on to a certain lifestyle, or to an investment portfolio. These projects built to satisfy the demands of the ultra-rich help push up property prices across the board while simultaneously deadening urban neighborhoods. No personal touch, no gesture of care, no life is brought to them—no more caring space. That capitalism leaves a trail of devastation in its wake is no big news. Architectural theorist Matthew Soules, whose book *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin* is a study of real estate market mechanisms, sees these neither dead nor alive buildings as “zombies.”

With her new body of work, Monika Emmanuelle Kazi plunges right into the heart of the contradictions pervading housing issues today. By using found photography to reproduce the interiors of luxury skyscrapers and superimpose them on private interiors, she intertwines these disparate spaces. Members of her own entourage and family slip into these palimpsests, too, taking the place of the real estate agency models sketched in silhouette. The artist envisages luxury apartments occupied by real people—and, too, her own ideal live-work space. Among Kazi’s image sources is a project by photographer Dominique Nabokov, who has spent years photographing the domestic interiors of players in the “cultural industries.” Here, in several metropolises around the globe, the camera serves to satisfy a certain voyeuristic curiosity; indeed, Nabokov goes so far as to cite in each caption the inhabitant’s name and occupation—for she regards the work as a series of portraits. These photographs oscillate between a perfect mise-en-scene of art and design objects and a meticulous mapping of everyday gestures of care and affection for those objects.

Having pursued architectural studies before opting for the visual arts, Kazi is no stranger to this blurry line between the private and the public realms. In her practice she draws on her personal history and links it to the bigger picture, conjuring situations that straddle the documentary and fictional dimensions. Actually, the artist recently moved into her first apartment and is eager to gradually settle in there, according to her tastes and needs, as in a three-dimensional “blank page” origami. Her dual aim, here, is to avoid the pitfall of blandly projecting autobiographical details onto her artistic creation and, instead, to play the game of mirroring both the private—public and the fictional—documentary realms, as proposed in her multifaceted exhibition. Positioned here and there are panes of glass, the material par excellence for skyscraper facades, as well as silver paint and small mirrors that multiply and engulf each visitor to the exhibition, projecting bodies into these reappropriated, yearned for, inhabited, or abandoned spaces. The drips running down some of the plates literally bring “liquidity” into play. They also evoke the familiar steamed-up bathroom mirror of our daily hygiene regime. It is precisely this—the attention or, to use the more common term, the care given to objects, people, and bodies—which plays a crucial part in the construction of a home (and this, apparently, from an early age on): “[The house] is a material order involving objects and people in an economy that interweaves things, affects, ourselves, and others into the minimal spatial unity of what we call care or, in the broadest sense: home.” (Coccia 13–14) Text by Claire Hoffmann

Sources:

Emanuele Coccia, *Philosophy of the House. Domestic Space and Happiness*, Penguin Books UK, 2024, transl. by Richard Dixon

Matthew Soules, *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra Thin: Architecture and Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2021

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Kazi was born 1991, in Paris (France) and grew up between Pointe-Noire (Republic of Congo) as well as Paris. Today, she lives and works in Geneva. After studying interior design, she studied fine arts at HEAD-Genève and graduated with honors in 2021. Recent solo and duo exhibitions include at PHILIPPZOLLINGER (Zurich, 2024); Tunnel Tunnel (Lausanne, 2023); Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg (2022); Villa du Parc (Annemasse, 2022); PHILIPPZOLLINGER (Zurich, 2022); WallStreet (Fribourg, 2021); sic! Elephanthouse (Lucerne, 2021) and at HIT (Geneva, 2019). She has participated in numerous group shows, such as at Publiek Park (Antwerp, 2023); Forde (Genève, 2022); Centre d'Art Contemporain (Geneva, 2021); Futura (Prague, 2021); Limbo Space (Geneva, 2020) and at Le Kabinet (Brussels, 2018). In 2021, Kazi was the recipient of the Kiefer Hablitzel Prize and the HEAD-Galerie award. In 2022, Kazi completed a residency at La Cité des Arts in Paris.