

SITU-ARTE: The Localised Constructions of Jesús Palomino

VISITING THE HOUSE

With its origins in the expanded field of sculpture, the shack devised by the artist Jesús Palomino develops the inter-space between sculpture and architecture, which some current artists are frequently exploring. It usually consists in a unique space that may be situated in an empty city lot or inside the white cubicle of a gallery. Its design shows an awareness that natural light, like the rest of the natural and economic resources many citizens have, is limited. Ceilings made of transparent or coloured plastic provide an efficient solution, transforming the light from the sky into a rainbow of colours or filtering it through a translucent medium. The same kind of lighting is shed over cardboard bed-furniture, buckets with waste paint, papers, old clothes, oranges and rubbish items in a bright range of colours that constitute the furniture of the living room in the shack, that is, all the inside area, which given its extraordinary variable use could also be called being area or action area. These elements have been designed by the artist himself by resorting to the display of found objects and the poetic recycling of waste, along the lines of other work with urban waste such as Schwitters Unlimited or Neodada & Co. These examples of still life with base materials intensify the serene beauty of matter, while at the same time are one of the factors determining the activity, the use and the content of space. The walls of the shack are made of cardboard and wood planks painted in bright colours, green, yellow, blue, orange, red, which alternate with empty windows. The combination of shades, carefully planned, creates a calm atmosphere. Designed for specific locations, the rectilinear or curved profiles and the unstructured geometry of these constructions are however adjustable to any setting. The construction of the floor can be resolved by using the rubble in the empty lot, or if the shack is displayed in an art gallery, its very floor can easily be adapted. The house is flexible, light, and easy to dismantle if you feel like creating new situations or moving to occupy other places in the city. Precarious like your own existence, it will pose more questions than answers, altering your certitude about reality and fiction. Fragile in appearance, it offers on the other hand a form of dwelling so solid that it will put to the test your imagination and your way of being in the world. Place, not space, provides you with a harmonious atmosphere that will never conceal the risks of living out in the open. In some of its later versions, the shack is set

together with billboards that beam garish neon light, the counterpoint of that other peaceful and changing light that floods over the inside.

To visit the house, however, is not yet to dwell in it. To visit the shack is to have access to an aesthetic pleasure similar to that of a journey through a canvas by Klee or by a Dutch neoplasticist. The latter would be happy to show you the path from flat to three-dimensional shape: from contemplation to action, since the author would have devised modes of projection that, based on elemental relations between forms, also imagined new ways of living. In the shacks by Jesús Palomino, the disinterested pleasure provided by colour, material, light and shape can hardly be distinguished from that other, very interested, pleasure of freedom. And this is probably so because in them beats the conviction that the setting—both urban and domestic—cannot be altered without touching the life that exists inside it.

Dwelling inside the house

The shacks by Palomino constitute a metaphor of marginal settlement, a settlement literally on the fringes of the conditions imposed by those at the centre of the system. Palomino presents his works as “fictions of a non-determined world, free spaces, spaces on the fringe” that are filled with the best possible atmosphere of harmony within their own fiction. What is fictional depends on what we understand as real, and art knows a lot about games that turn truths into lies so that they can remain truths. The dwellers of his shacks—the author also tells us—keep enough of a personal or cultural surplus to generate a positive living space that may preserve them from adverse conditions.

In their sharp diagnosis of the city and predominant urban practices, the situationists reached the conclusion that all urban space is occupied by the enemy, and that this occupation must end, that is, space must be liberated and become clearly positive against adverse conditions. Like Gordon Matta-Clark, who by means of his anarchitecture and his non-mental structures acted upon undeveloped spaces or spaces beyond the concern of urban planners, Jesús Palomino also gets inspired by and bases his creation on these void spaces which escape the power of planning. In a critical reflection about their metaphorical condition, both artists transform these places in a state of the mind. Although Palomino himself indicates the shock produced by the fact that the empty lots in Queens that Matta-Clark bought and transformed into one of his art works,

are not even suitable for his shacks, due to their small size and peculiar shape, there is no doubt that the lots owned by Matta-Clark are the best symbolic space for Palomino's constructions. If Matta-Clark highlighted the *reductio ad absurdum* of the workings of the rigid and omnipresent logic of property, Palomino's shacks underline in a constructive manner those discontinuities of the urban landscape, the leftovers of planning, which a capitalist economy with no imagination at all can only conceive as merchandise, forgetting that there are more things on the earth and the sky than what can be displayed for sale; or dwellers, like the ones in these shacks, that have decided to construct their own desires, to think for themselves instead of reflecting themselves in the desires of others that have controlled construction for and instead of us; there probably lies the cultural and personal surplus that the artist attributes to them.

Jesús Palomino thus works in the wake of the entropy or lost energy that the development and growth of a city produces. In choosing urban shacks as inspiration and image for his artistic creation, in selecting waste objects as furniture and decoration, his work seems to start from the same idea that also moved Robert Smithson: "The only solution is to accept the situation of entropy and learn more or less to bring in again those objects that seem to be ugly". Jesús Palomino goes beyond elaborating a mere register of the medium or an argument for the dustbin. Entropy is also an indication of our no-return that warns us how improbable it is to go back to a natural state no longer in existence and the difficulty implicit in reconciliation with the environment. The protection that his shacks provide for us is not only a defence; it is also an active critical tool of dispossession against the control and oppression setting that is devised by the pragmatic society of entertainment. They are thus places that interfere in your daily movements, which show a path to move from inhabiting as a supplement of production and consumption to dwelling as pleasure and knowledge. Palomino offers us a shelter unit that looks both poor and harmonious against the mental and spiritual poverty that a world ruled by the logic of results gives us as a desirable model, the poverty that has its appropriate setting in the malls of foolishness. It is then absolutely befitting that Palomino should have brought into his latest shacks a kind of appendix in the form of a billboard, the vehicle of desires we no longer know were once ours.

Camus wrote: "The meaning of tomorrow's history is not what will be created. It is to be found in the struggle between inquisition and

creation. Whatever the price the artists may have to pay for their empty hands, we can expect their victory". Inquisition reminds you constantly that "placing yourself" ("situarte")¹ is to become a hardworking man according to the rules of the economy. Palomino's shacks, always designed for specific locations, teach you a different way of placing yourself, a way based on a meaning of the word economy that is closer to its original Greek sense of management of the house, which can be metaphorically interpreted as knowledge of the house, knowledge of living. This kind of *oikos nomoi* is not afraid of empty hands; on the contrary, it is based precisely on *the unexpected policy of the hands* that led Palomino first to furnish the house, then to build his shacks. Some of these have titles such as *Hungry Market Town* or *There must be something wrong between this economy and me*.

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¹ The Spanish word "situarte" (place yourself) becomes a pun when hyphenated ("situ-arte") as in the title, meaning then also "art of/in the place".