Demonstration Room: Ideal House: Apex Art: 2001

February 7 - March 10, 2001
Curated by Jesús Fuenmayor and Julieta González

The room-space is not there for the eyes alone, it is not a picture, it must be lived in.
El Lissitzky, Proun Room, Great Berlin Art Exhibition, 1923

Demonstration Room

Exhibitions are systems of representation in which every aspect, from the curatorial premise and control of artists and works, to the display and lighting design, has a specific meaning. They are instruments of cultural mediation between the art on display and the public. In this sense, the idea of making an exhibition on the subject of ideas of representation demanded that the curatorial premise and exhibition design itself deal with this fact.

For Demonstration Room, Ideal House, the choice of El Lissitzky’s model of exhibition design is representative of many of the ideas we wished to address in the show, namely, utopia, representation and architecture. Specifically because El Lissitzky’s first work of art in a long tradition of museum-based conceptual art which transcended its status as “work of art” and poised itself as a curatorial and exhibition design paradigm that fully acknowledged artists’ concerns for the conditions of production, exhibition, and reception of the work. El Lissitzky’s Demonstration Room was originally conceived, in its first and second versions of 1926 and 1927, as a space in which to exhibit “the new constructive art.”

This “new art” called for a revision of traditional forms of exhibition, and not only in terms of spatial distribution of works. According to Benjamin Buchloh, “contingency and particularity are therefore the prime faculties of Lissitzky’s design element in the First Demonstration Room. The paintings and sculptures on display in these exhibition/museum spaces are no longer presented as epiphanies, as products of supreme aesthetic truth and universal efficacy, but as particular objects of historical study, with which the viewer has to actively engage in order to generate an exchange of ‘reading’ and ‘meaning’.”

The idea of contingency has thus been a particular importance in organizing this exhibition in which we have tried to reproduce the operations by which El Lissitzky’s Demonstration Room conditioned the spectator’s experience and reception of the works via the blurring of the boundaries between the exhibition space and the works exhibited, and also by calling into question the distinctions between project and object in the work of contemporary art.

To this end we proposed that our demonstration room take the shape of an architect’s office, in order to place the works in a setting that is both discursive, specifically in terms of voicing a reading about the practice of the architect, the language of the blueprint and the particularities of architectural representation in this gallery.
The utopian tone, both in relation to our context but also to other utopian speculations currently taking place elsewhere, is not a celebratory one since it entails the strange possibility of looking at utopia from a historical point of view and the paradox of looking backwards at the future. Moreover, at the beginning of our research, we were interested in the contrast between utopian promises of development and our concrete urban reality in Latin America. In this regard there was an obvious potential to make room for the idea, which can eventually be materialized or not. Others have worked on the notion of the model as a material representation of the project, but that as a work of art accompanies de-totaled qualities. In the context of our exhibition, our function as a critic is to refer to the most notorious experimental utopian undertakings run by a good part of contemporary urban theory. But what is more meaningful in relation to the shanty is the fact that it is an anachronism of utopia and also of the house, and in spite of this and of all the inherent contradictions, the shanty constitutes itself a possibility of rethinking the city. These ideas inform our desire to reflect upon the house as simultaneously the new locus for utopia and its anachronism.

The artists

For Demonstration Room: Ideal House we invited artists whose work denotes a close interest in the theme of the house, which has become so important to our comprehension of modernity, and also a group of artists whose interests were more diverse. But the common ground was the fact that in their practices they all relate to twentieth-century art production in terms of a critique of the very relations between object and project that are at the core of our proposal. And apart from the selection of existing work, we suggested that they work on the idea of the project. The majority has dealt with the project-oriented nature of contemporary art practice, where the object has made room for the idea, which can eventually be materialized or not. Others have worked on the notion of the model as a material representation of the project, but that as a work of art accompanies de-totaled qualities. In the context of our exhibition, our function as a critic is to refer to the most notorious experimental utopian undertakings run by a good part of contemporary urban theory. But what is more meaningful in relation to the shanty is the fact that it is an anachronism of utopia and also of the house, and in spite of this and of all the inherent contradictions, the shanty constitutes itself a possibility of rethinking the city. These ideas inform our desire to reflect upon the house as simultaneously the new locus for utopia and its anachronism.