

## 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 choice of artists and works, to the display and lighting design, has a specific meaning. They are also 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 utopia and representation demanded that the curatorial premise and exhibition design itself deal self-consciously with the issue.

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 it is the first work of art in a long tradition of museum-based conceptual art which transcended its status as "work of art" and posited 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 features 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 epiphanic moments of supreme aesthetic truth and universal validity, 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 of 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 also discursive, specifically in terms of establishing a reading about the practice of the architect, the language of the blueprint and the particularities of architectural representation. In this sense,

### apexart curatorial program

291 church street

new york, ny 10013

212 431-5270 ph

212 431-4447 fx

info@apexart.org

www.apexart.org

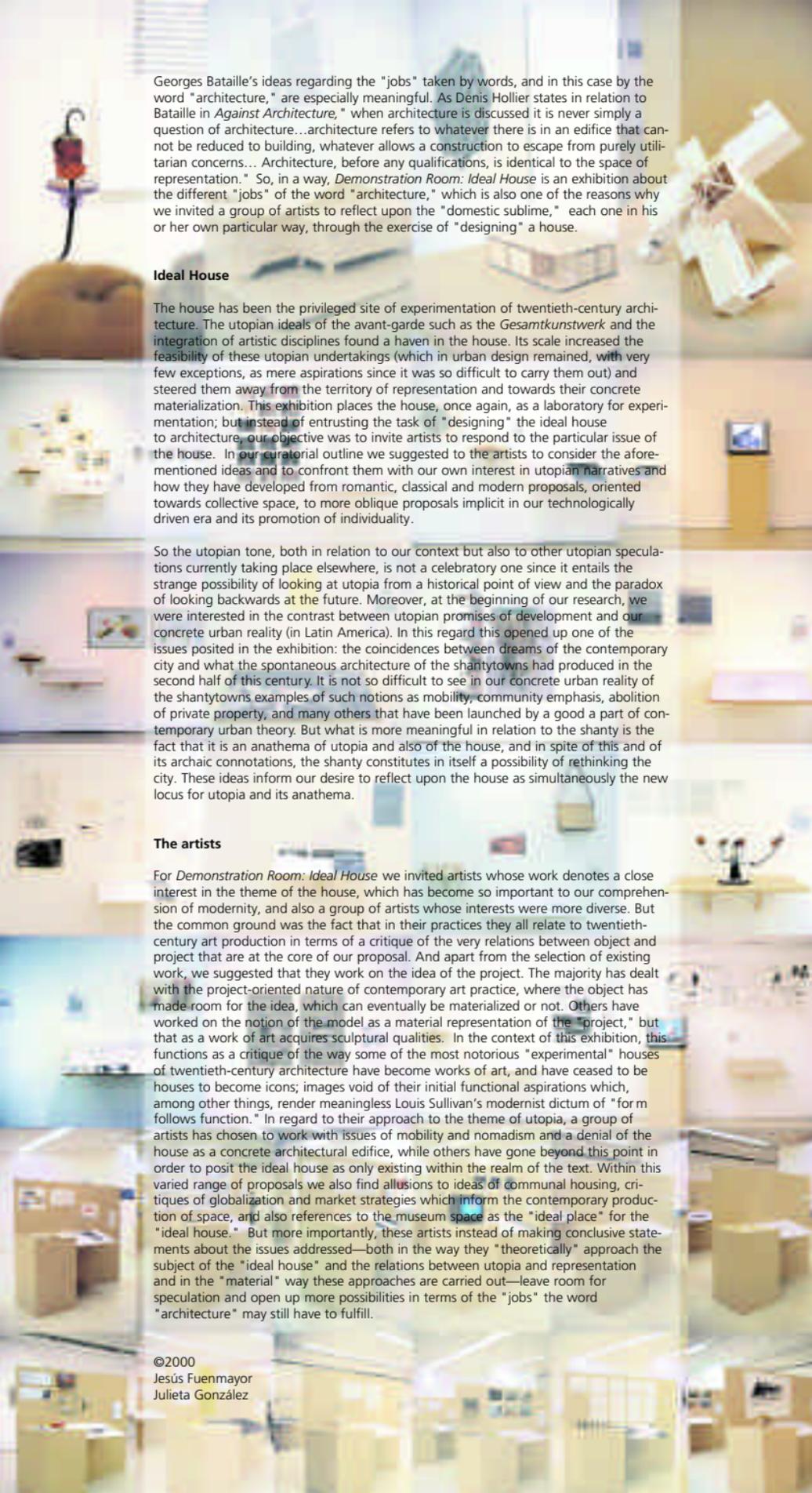
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Francis Ajijs (MEX/BEL)  
Carla Arocha (US/VEN)  
Anna Best (UK)  
Stefan Bruggeman (MEX)  
Mariana Bunimov (VEN)  
Minerva Cuevas (MEX)  
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José Gabriel Fernández (VEN)  
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Carlos Garaicoa (CUBA)  
Alexander Gerdel (VEN)  
Liam Gillick (UK)  
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Jose Antonio Hernández-Díez (VEN)  
Proyecto Incidental (MEX)  
Gabriel Kuri (MEX)  
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Javier Téllez (VEN)  
Meyer Vaisman (VEN)  
Sergio Vega (ARG/USA)



Georges Bataille's ideas regarding the "jobs" taken by words, and in this case by the word "architecture," are especially meaningful. As Denis Hollier states in relation to Bataille in *Against Architecture*, "when architecture is discussed it is never simply a question of architecture...architecture refers to whatever there is in an edifice that cannot be reduced to building, whatever allows a construction to escape from purely utilitarian concerns... Architecture, before any qualifications, is identical to the space of representation." So, in a way, *Demonstration Room: Ideal House* is an exhibition about the different "jobs" of the word "architecture," which is also one of the reasons why we invited a group of artists to reflect upon the "domestic sublime," each one in his or her own particular way, through the exercise of "designing" a house.

### Ideal House

The house has been the privileged site of experimentation of twentieth-century architecture. The utopian ideals of the avant-garde such as the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the integration of artistic disciplines found a haven in the house. Its scale increased the feasibility of these utopian undertakings (which in urban design remained, with very few exceptions, as mere aspirations since it was so difficult to carry them out) and steered them away from the territory of representation and towards their concrete materialization. This exhibition places the house, once again, as a laboratory for experimentation; but instead of entrusting the task of "designing" the ideal house to architecture, our objective was to invite artists to respond to the particular issue of the house. In our curatorial outline we suggested to the artists to consider the aforementioned ideas and to confront them with our own interest in utopian narratives and how they have developed from romantic, classical and modern proposals, oriented towards collective space, to more oblique proposals implicit in our technologically driven era and its promotion of individuality.

So 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 this opened up one of the issues posited in the exhibition: the coincidences between dreams of the contemporary city and what the spontaneous architecture of the shantytowns had produced in the second half of this century. It is not so difficult to see in our concrete urban reality of the shantytowns examples of such notions as mobility, community emphasis, abolition of private property, and many others that have been launched 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 anathema of utopia and also of the house, and in spite of this and of its archaic connotations, the shanty constitutes in 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 anathema.

### 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 acquires sculptural qualities. In the context of this exhibition, this functions as a critique of the way some of the most notorious "experimental" houses of twentieth-century architecture have become works of art, and have ceased to be houses to become icons; images void of their initial functional aspirations which, among other things, render meaningless Louis Sullivan's modernist dictum of "for m follows function." In regard to their approach to the theme of utopia, a group of artists has chosen to work with issues of mobility and nomadism and a denial of the house as a concrete architectural edifice, while others have gone beyond this point in order to posit the ideal house as only existing within the realm of the text. Within this varied range of proposals we also find allusions to ideas of communal housing, critiques of globalization and market strategies which inform the contemporary production of space, and also references to the museum space as the "ideal place" for the "ideal house." But more importantly, these artists instead of making conclusive statements about the issues addressed—both in the way they "theoretically" approach the subject of the "ideal house" and the relations between utopia and representation and in the "material" way these approaches are carried out—leave room for speculation and open up more possibilities in terms of the "jobs" the word "architecture" may still have to fulfill.