

World of Interiors

Imagine a door with no room: Are you inside or outside? *by Amy Sherlock*

I used to keep a postcard reproduction of René Magritte's *La Victoire* (Victory) on my bedside table. Painted in 1939, this small work shows a spectral door, camouflaged in the hazy colours of the seascape behind it, standing on the shore. The door is slightly ajar; a trademark cotton-wool cloud hangs lazily against the jamb. The riddle: do we step through it into another world entirely, or do we just end up with the hems of our trousers wet? Perhaps we are already in a room, an inside decorated as an outside; maybe the door leads to the imaginary spaces behind the shutters of our eyes. The unfortunate victim of a morning coffee spillage, the postcard was eventually thrown away, but I continue to wonder what Magritte's image says about the spaces that we inhabit and the extent to which these are constructed both architectonically and with our imaginations. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard writes: 'The house shelters day-dreaming, [...] the house allows one to dream in peace.'¹ But the reverse is also true. Houses can be the stuff of dreams, and not necessarily peaceful ones. As Sigmund Freud pointed out, by putting the home (*heim*) at the centre of his theory of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), houses are sometimes the strangest, most unnervingly inexplicable places of all. ('But everyone's dreams are "strange" [...] I like the other dreams, the daily ones, everywhere, eyes open,' said Dorothea Tanning.²)

A room is never just a room; it's also the promise of a backstory. On the threshold between public and private realms, homes are the sets on and through which we stage various aspects of our own characters, as well as where we play out the interpersonal dramas of our everyday lives – the love stories, farces and occasional tragedies. Interiors tell these stories materially, which is perhaps why artists and curators have so often used them to tell theirs.

In recent months, I have been in, or in front of, a number of exhibitions and artworks that have aimed to transport me to a more intimate space than the gallery or museum in which I was standing. Sometimes the strategy is total, immersive; sometimes the illusion of domestic scale is propped up by the slenderest of architectonic or decorative supports. Such artworks ask: What makes a room a room? What are the most basic features that can sustain the pretence? And why do we let ourselves be convinced?

'Question your tea spoons,'³ instructed the writer Georges Perec: in other words, there is not a space too familiar, nor a utensil too banal, to warrant a closer look.



Jonas Wood
Interior with Fireplace, 2012,
oil and acrylic on
canvas on paper, 2.6 × 2.3 m

Courtesy
the artist and David Kordansky
Gallery, Los Angeles;
photograph: Fredrik Nilsen



Curtain

[Adolf] Loos told me one day: 'A cultivated man does not look out of the window; his window is a ground glass; it is only there to let the light in, not to let the gaze pass through.' Le Corbusier, *Urbanism*, 1925

You are in the entrance hall to someone's house. The staircase is blocked off by a floor-to-ceiling curtain, black but waftily translucent. In a kind of oblique double homage to Lucio Fontana and Kazimir Malevich, it is marked by three painted blocks of scarlet and one rectangular slit – a window that opens and closes according to the fabric's mobile concertina as it glides along a ceiling track. Three more curtains pass through the other rooms, briefly and unexpectedly dividing the space with their unknown choreography. A soundtrack of Bettye LaVette's sumptuous ballad 'Let Me down Easy' (1965) interjects sporadically. The curtains are seductive, protective even, but also slightly inconvenient, cutting off conversations and the flow of cocktails as they corral you gently into corners.

Nick Mauss's installation *By, With, To & From* (2014) was conceived as a site-specific response to the London headquarters of the Fiorucci Art Trust – a domestic property at 10 Sloane Avenue in Kensington – where it was shown last year. The trust cohabits with the private collection of its founder, Nicoletta Fiorucci, from which Mauss selected several artworks to

be hung in the space for the duration of the installation. The curtains, therefore, also served to frame the other pieces on display, playing on a long-standing assumption that décor is only ever an accessory. 10 Sloane Avenue is not an exhibition space as such but, rather, plays host to the numerous events that typify the Trust's social approach to the production and presentation of art: a public/private space *par excellence*.

Mauss's curtains, shifting continually, constantly redefine what is outside and what is inside, what is hidden and what is on display. They're a reminder of the fluid ease with which we pass from observer to observed in today's mediated society, where privacy itself is little more than a translucent veil, pulled back at will, and only ever partial.

Loos's distaste for windows, and the reason that so many of his rooms are designed to face inwards, seems bound up with his profound aversion to certain excessive modes of display: a philosophy of sufficiency, tending towards functionalism, which informed his lean architectural Modernism. The subtext to Loos's aesthetics is an ethical one: that there is a right way of looking at things and of inviting people to look, and a wrong one. Mauss's installation – bold, intrusive, flamboyant – and the melodramatic tenor of LaVette's intermittent accompaniment, make a case for the theatricality of (self-)presentation. If all the world is a stage, then we should be free to flounce across it however we please.

See also:

Félix González-Torres
González-Torres produced an oeuvre in which the slightest of objects are charged with bodily presence. His curtain works – *Untitled (Loverboy)* (1989), *Untitled (Beginning)* (1994) and *Untitled (Golden)* (1995) – deal with porosity and passage, visibility, distance, joining and separation. Such ideas are particularly poignant in light of the death of his partner, Ross Laycock, from AIDS-related complications, in 1991, and his own death from similar causes five years later.

Kazimir Malevich
The famous *Black Square* motif – the early 20th century's most violently iconoclastic artistic gesture – first appeared in Malevich's design for the stage curtain for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). Concerned with melodrama as much as transcendence, the square refuses the embodied illusionism of the theatre as well as the representational plane of the canvas.

Lucy McKenzie
Drapes and curtains recur in McKenzie's work, reflecting the artist's ongoing interest in fabric and the social dimensions of its production and circulation. Proving the partitions between art and artisanal disciplines to be porous – in particular furniture and fashion – she also collaborates with the textile designer Beca Lipscombe as Atelier E.B.

Pot Plant

The palm at the end of the mind, Beyond the last thought, rises In the bronze distance.
Wallace Stevens, 'Of Mere Being', 1954

Two plasterboard walls, a potted palm and a framed portrait of a horse form an L-shaped section of a stage or movie set that floats just adrift of the sturdier gallery wall. The plant – plastic – stands in the corner, a fold of one world tucked into another. Edging between them, you might see a single A4 piece of paper taped to the reverse of the plywood: a fictional narrative about the bright-eyed horse and his Mafioso owner, the scene's literal backstory.

The work, by William Leavitt, was shown as part of the group exhibition 'Last Seen Entering the Biltmore' at South London Gallery last year. It is one of the artist's least cryptically titled. *Cutaway View* (2008) is precisely that: a partial vision of a particularly urbane, sun-drenched-and-martinis-by-the-pool version of the American Dream. I think this has to do with the pot plant: there is something irrepressibly louche about a potted palm, even a plastic one. Perhaps it's the way it casually asserts mastery over the tropical (the formerly far-flung and exotic as domestic décor). Here, as in other of Leavitt's sets/installations, the plant is the emissary of the world outside, enforcing the illusion of domesticity by invoking wildness; also, as a living thing, it becomes a form of avatar within Leavitt's unpopulated scenes. (The uncanniness of the sentient plant has given rise to its illustrious, if frequently sinister, silver screen history – think of *The Day of the Triffids* (1962) or the seed pods from *The Body Snatchers* (1956) – which lends the installation an atmosphere of delicious unease.)

Leavitt has lived and worked in Los Angeles since 1965 and his interest in the physical supports of on-screen illusion extends from the suburban to the sci-fi (which, in Hollywood, are often only a street apart). In *Artic Earth* (2014), his installation for last year's Liverpool Biennial, curtains billow from tract-house windows that overlook a radiant earthscape, as if the room were perched on the edge of outer space. Saturated in cinematic cliché, Leavitt's oeuvre grows out of from the well-worn conceit that the hyperbolic fantasies of Hollywood reiterate something fundamental about the way that we stage our daily lives. (See 'The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life', 1959 by the American sociologist Erving Goffman.) His deadpan repetitions probe the enduring appeal of the stock – character, plotline, setting. If these seduce again and again without becoming tired, it is because of our ongoing fascination with Hollywood fairytales, both on and off-screen. And if, over time, the works become parodies of themselves – coming to look less like film sets and more distinctly like Leavitts – closing the ouroboros-like circle of referentiality, then so much the better.

See also:

Madeleine Castaing

The legendary French interior designer and patroness, who was Chaim Soutine's muse and Jean Cocteau's decorator, was amongst the first to attempt to bring the outside inside, with fabric patterns of dense foliage and jungle canopies. Her work has been reprised by contemporary artists such as Flora Whiteley, whose show, 'Kammerspiele', at September in Berlin last year, featured paintings of Castaing's interiors, including *Cocteau's Palm* (2011), and the designer's own abandoned country house.

Mike Nelson

Different kind of plant; different kind of pot. For his 2005 installation *Between a Formula and a Code*, the artist transformed an abandoned building into a fictional cannabis farm. Nelson's uncanny immersive interiors are less about personal trauma and, instead, draw out social fears and anxieties, often highly mediated, about foreignness or otherness.

Hélio Oiticica

His landmark installation *Tropicália* (1966–67) used potted palms and other lush vegetation as distinct signifiers of Brazilian-ness, to quite literally root his art in the socio-political reality, by turns brutal and banal, of an economically troubled country under a dictatorship.

Jonas Wood

Paintings that could be patterns for a style Castaing carpet, Wood's large-scale 'landscape pots', shown recently at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, set 'clippings' of plants isolated from earlier paintings of lush, foliage-punctuated interiors in vessels adorned by landscapes. Some of these seem imagined, while others are fantastically real – like the acid-bright sunset over the Hudson in *Maritime Hotel Pot with Aloe* (2014). They function both as wallpaper and windows, collaging species of spaces on top of one another – mocking of, whilst wholly complicit in, our tendency to reduce the outside world to a backdrop for inner drama.



Bed

For a long time, I went to bed early.
Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann's*,
1913, trans. Lydia Davis

Many great stories begin in the bedroom; and many end there, too. Jean Cocteau's one-act drama *La Voix Humaine* (The Human Voice, 1930), for instance, is confined to a single bedroom in which a lone heroine – known only as *Elle* (Her) – speaks over the phone to a former lover. The increasingly hysterical conversation ends with her draped ambiguously across a day bed, the telephone cord wrapped around her neck.

Marc Camille Chaimowicz borrows the day bed and rotary dial telephone in his installation *Jean Cocteau ...* (2003–14), first shown at Norwich Art Gallery and included most recently in the exhibition 'Portraits d'Intérieurs' (Interior Portraits) at Nouveau Musée National de Monaco (NMNM). Part fanciful imaginary bedroom of the French poet and part homage to his particular form of dilletantism in its combination of design and décor elements with 'high' arts, the installation changes with each new presentation. The wallpaper and carpets (designed by Chaimowicz, their sinuous lines echoing Cocteau's own) stay the same, as do other items, including a Marcel Breuer chair and a half-topped desk of the artist's own design. The installation always contains a work by Andy Warhol – in this case, aptly, a 1983 screenprint of *Princess Caroline of Monaco*. A guest at Grace Kelly's marriage to Prince Rainier, Cocteau haunts NMNM's *Belle Époque* Villa Sauber. The scenographer Christian Bérard, who created the enchanted backdrops of Cocteau's film *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), worked for the Ballets Russes at the Monaco Opera House, as did Cocteau himself, designing posters such as the one from 1911 showing Vaslav Nijinsky, feline and tapered, wreathed in rosebuds, which opens the show.

The coffee service on the table in *Jean Cocteau ...* extends an invitation; it's flirtatious, coquettish almost, with intimations of woozy mornings-after. It also reprises a motif from Chaimowicz's early installation-performance-environments, such as *Celebration? Realife*, originally shown at Gallery House in London in 1972. Here, amidst what appeared to be the glittering debris of a party, the artist invited visitors to join him for coffee and conversation. The studio/apartment on Approach Road, east London, where Chaimowicz lived and worked between 1975–79 was a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which the wallpaper, sculptural assemblages and serving of tea were of equal artistic merit. In a way that presaged the Relational Aesthetics of the 1990s and opposed prevailing Conceptual and Minimal currents of the time, neither idea nor object is autonomous in Chaimowicz's work. Reality is not opposed to theatricality: rather, what is real is having somebody to share the illusion with.

Hence the bed, which acts as a form of shorthand for all relationships and reminds us, too, that there is a sexual politics of space.

'It is the personality of the mistress that the home expresses,' Elsie de Wolfe explained in her 1913 bestseller, *The House in Good Taste*, articulating a long-standing association between décor and the feminine that remains prevalent more than a century later. Chaimowicz plays up to this gendering of the domestic: his architectural sculptures are made of ply and would support very little, parodying the potential functionality of 'industrial' Minimal structures such as Donald Judd's shelves or Carl Andre's bricks. Since the 1970s, Chaimowicz has almost exclusively used a pastel colour scheme, never including black, which he considers too distinct, too absolute, definitively separating one thing from another. Black can be read as straining towards transcendental significance (think of Malevich, again), while lilac and mint green are mired in their floral or saccharine associations. It would seem that Chaimowicz prefers to let these hover, forming a synaesthetic mist of half-remembered, half-imagined sensory impressions where desires linger, like the shadows of dreams, without coming into sharp focus.

See also:

Janette Laverrière
An apprentice of Art Deco master Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann in the 1930s, Laverrière returned to critical attention in her later years, in part due to her collaborations with Nairy Baghramian, an artist who herself has consistently explored architectural and domestic frameworks. Laverrière's 1947 installation *Entre deux actes, Loge de comédienne* (Between Two Acts: An Actress's Dressing Room), restaged at Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in 2009, features a day bed: to rest but not to sleep, which suggests the act of life is never over.

Claes Oldenburg
Bedroom Ensemble (1963) was based on a Malibu motel in which each room was decorated with different kinds of faux animal-print. Along with the earlier functional installation *The Store* (1961) – a shopfront on the Lower East Side where he sold his papier-mâché wares – it marked a decisive point in the artist's aggrandizing of the most mundane of items in sculptural form.

Gregor Schneider
The dark, heavy sexuality that permeates *Haus u r*, the artist's 1:1 re-creation of his childhood home in Rheydt (1985–ongoing), suggests the violence of loving and loathing at the heart of the Freudian family dynamic, and a sense of dangerous, nightmarish overfamiliarity.

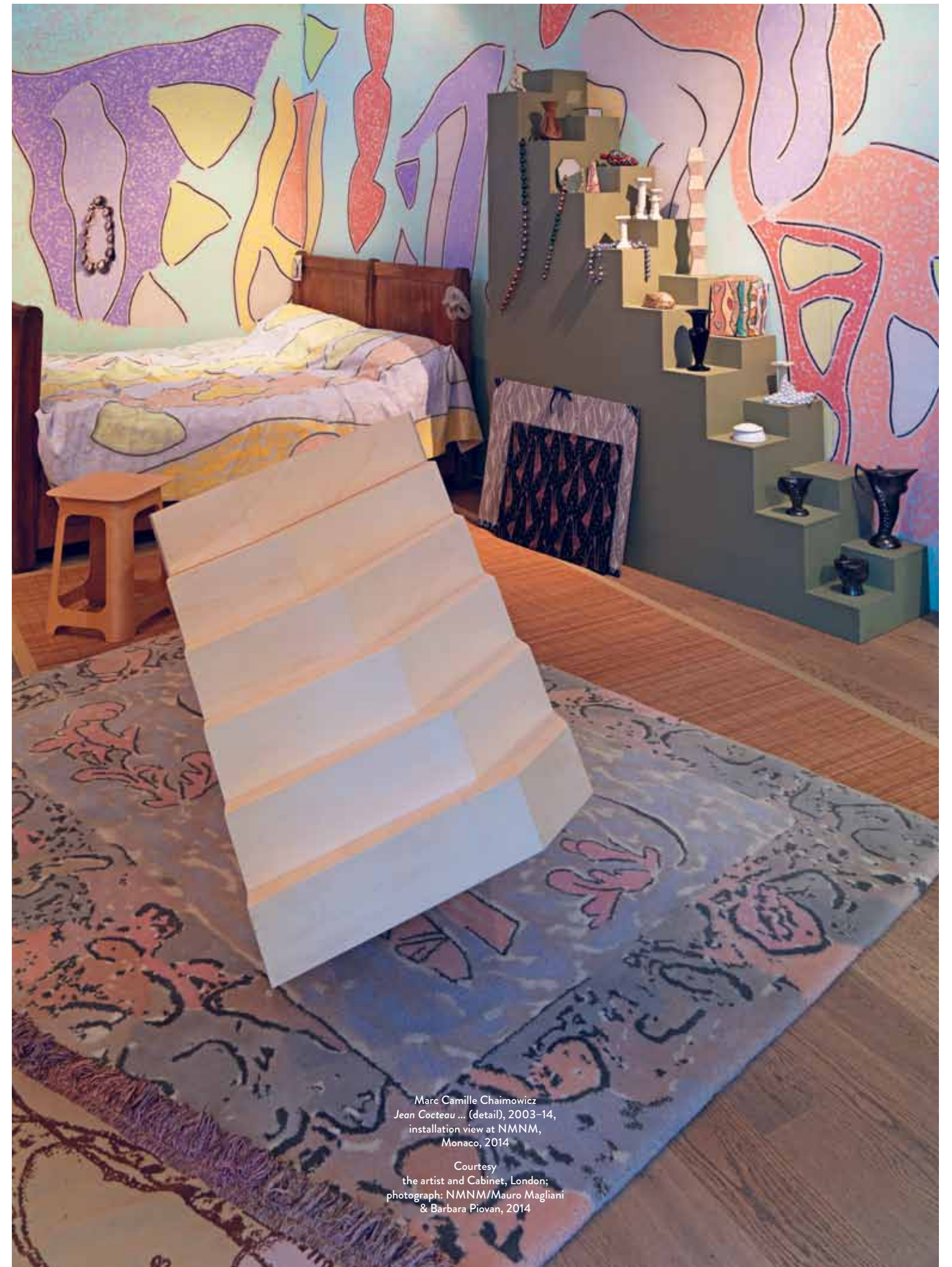
Like the house itself, a bed offers ambiguous shelter. Our beds define us, but they are also spaces for dreaming. Interior design – as the dressing of private rooms for semi-public display – has often been a form of expression for those people (women, homosexuals) who have historically been excluded from public life. But semi-public is not quite public and the freedom to dream is a particularly restricted kind of freedom.

Significant legal, political and economic advances have been made by women and the LGBT community since artists like Judy Chicago and Martha Rosler took up the second-generation feminist rallying call that 'the personal is the political', asserting the value of the domestic space as artistic subject matter. And hierarchies between the applied and fine arts have been partially dismantled by contemporary artists' promiscuous dealings in the traditionally 'craft' materials of textiles and ceramics, as well as by recent retrospectives of figures such as Sonia Delaunay, Eileen Gray and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for whom interior design, fabrics and furnishings were fully integrated into a rigorous Avant-garde practice.

To return, by means of another blue door: Warhol, who perhaps went the furthest in staging life as art or art as life, was an inveterate collector of everything from early works by Roy Lichtenstein to Federal-era furniture and kitschy ceramic cookie jars, filling the rooms of his Upper East Side townhouse until it was almost uninhabitable. In 1977, the Museum of American Folk Art showed part of Warhol's collection in an exhibition titled 'Folk and Funk'. The show's catalogue cover has Warhol peeking through an 18th-century colonial blue door frame that stands isolated against a black background. With words that both neatly express the home's limitless imaginative potential and caution against retreating into it, Warhol claimed that the door was his favourite item: 'because you go in and out and you never get anywhere'. ♦♦

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1958, trans. Maria Jolas, Beacon, Boston, 1994, p.6
- 2 Dorothea Tanning in conversation with Alain Jouffroy, 1974, re-published in *Dorothea Tanning*, Malmö Konsthall, 1993, p.65
- 3 Georges Perec, 'Approaches to What?', 1973, in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. and ed. John Sturrock, Penguin, London, 1997, p.110

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Marc Camille Chaimowicz
Jean Cocteau ... (detail), 2003–14,
installation view at NMNM,
Monaco, 2014

Courtesy
the artist and Cabinet, London;
photograph: NMNM/Mauro Magliani
& Barbara Piovani, 2014