

Reimagining the Home: dwelling and its discontents

Hannah Marsden and Alison Merritt Smith interview Gary Anderson of the Liverpool-based artist's initiative, *The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*.



1 'In this commodified construction of personal achievement and lifestyle, the house often becomes an end in itself.' – Iris Marion Young.

We have decided to voice our discontent. We have decided to disobey. We, as a family, have decided to be naughty.

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is a home-based initiative, run out of a family home on the border of Everton and Anfield, Liverpool, UK. The Institute is run by a family of two adults and four children, collectively called twoaddthreeplusone (Gary Anderson, Lena Simic, Neal (16), Gabriel (14), Sid (8), and James (2)). The Institute is a self-sufficient and sustainable initiative drawing 10% of all income from its members (Gary and Lena work as university lecturers as well as freelance artists; the children receive child benefit). It is concerned with dissent, homemade aesthetics, financial

transparency, as well as critiquing the commodification of culture. Interested in social transformation, the Institute has refigured a part of the family living space into a meeting place for artists, activists, and cultural dissenters. This activity is undertaken in order to develop and extend dialogues about a 'culture' not necessarily driven by market forces. The Institute has hosted a number of artist residencies and events, ranging from individual encounters through group conversations to theatrical performances in their family home.

Hannah Marsden and Alison Merritt Smith interviewed Gary Anderson at home, around the kitchen table. Lena Simic was at work and the children were at school.

Hannah: If we want to think about 'reimagining the home' perhaps we should begin by understanding what we are talking about when we say 'home'. Gary, what does home mean to you?

Gary: I don't think I like the word home, because I think probably the word home needs a lot more unpacking, because of what it conjures up in almost everyone's head, certainly in my head, which is warmth, shelter, family, love, protection, and obviously all the negatives it conjures up as well: oppression, prison, arguments and fights and not being able to be liberated. Home means all of those things instantly. So I wonder even if it is a useful term?

I'd like home to be an actualising space; a space that makes concrete particular possibilities and capabilities of the people and the things that go on in that place that we call home. A perfect home would be one that didn't wickedly prevent something that was possible. For us, the Institute didn't come out of worrying about what a home was, but then obviously it is situated within the home, at least a part of it. I mistrust the word. It's a bit like the word community – they are dodgy things.

Alison: So in thinking about the home, or the living space, as a site of resistance or activism, what does that resistance look like for you in the everyday?

G: It is important to paint the picture of what were are resisting. And I say 'we' without any licence there at all. I can't say 'we' for the Institute because I can't speak for Lena, and I can't speak for Neal or Gabriel or Sid or James. I can't speak for any of them. So for me, I think what I am intending to resist is a more or less full complicity in a system of living and thinking that makes agency as small as possible. So my own personal agency is reduced to a point that I can't actually have an effect on anything, especially my own life. So, first and foremost I think that I am trying to resist the systematic reduction of my own agency. What does that look like? Even though that sounds quite grandiose, in actual everyday life where things happen, that just transfers to really simple things like, saying that a room in the house is going to be used for purposes other than

that for which they were designed.

All of the values that the architect had when he designed these houses – and I'm almost certain that it wasn't a sole architect dreaming this up in 2013 [the date the family house was designed], it's just a huge corporate system and the design element, I'm sure, is really miniscule. But the way that this house is designed nevertheless presents us with a problem, because we are supposed to use the house in a particular kind of way, the way that it is conceived from the team of corporate designers. So, if you can intervene in the smallest way into how that's used, to deliberately say no to the conceived space, then I think there is a lot of everyday agency available to you.

Henri Lefebvre set out a programme of how you can self-liberate by going against the conception and the perception of how space is supposed to be organised, but what that means in an everyday sense is, for us, that you can use one of the rooms in the house to be naughty in. The room is supposed to be an 'upstairs lounge'. I remember sitting there with Lena and the kids and looking at the brochure and just going, 'What the fuck is an upstairs lounge? What do you do with that?' What are they trying to tell us when they give us – of course they don't give us it, we buy it – but what are they telling us when there is a living room downstairs that's got loads of sockets and you can only put the telly in one place 'cause that's where the aerial socket is, you don't really get much of a choice? So if you've got the telly downstairs and then you've got an upstairs lounge next to the other four bedrooms and you've got a bathroom with a bath and shower, what are you supposed to do with that upstairs lounge? They must be expecting you to buy into the fantasy that a home is the place of multiple leisure and luxury activities with not only one lounge, but two. Which is hilarious really.

H: So thinking about the everyday acts of resistance you describe, what kind of personal challenges or contradictions have you encountered?

G: [ex-prime minister of Great Britain] David Cameron

introduced the Help to Buy loan scheme where 20% of the value of the property could be borrowed from the government and then paid back interest free after five years. It's a classic conservative pro-market idea to get more people into more debt instead of building social housing. We took out one of those loans, so 20% of the whole place is provided for by Cameron's loan system but also is then publicly owned because it's the people's money. So we like to think that the 20% of the house that is publicly owned is the room itself, the Institute. But then my mum died two years ago and in selling the house we decided that with part of the money we'd buy off the public bit and reprivatise it to us, so that the house would be ours and wouldn't belong to the people. So the contradictions are just there everywhere and they are really juicy.

A: The resistant practice that we've talked about up until now is about neoliberalism and the market being in control and us not having agency, but I guess another oppressive system is that of patriarchy. How do you deal with that personally in your work, in your practice, in your household, and how does that work in terms of having four boys as well?

G: We consciously describe ourselves, me and Lena, as anarchist feminists, so that we have shared views on what patriarchy is, how it operates when it's in play, what the dangers are, how to go about trying to resist it. Like everything else it doesn't always work. The patriarchy keeps re-emerging through loads of different practices. It's not entirely accidental, although there are some accidents involved.

You're here now asking me about all this when probably structurally better equipped to answer the question is Lena being in a position of oppression from patriarchy. There is something about the way that patriarchy operates and the way the family is supposed to operate, there is a perfect hand-in-glove fit. It's a little bit like how the architecture of the house is designed, you don't quite know what you're being told but you know that you behave in a particular kind of way, which then reproduces all of the patriarchal systems, positions, and oppressions. So for me personally, it's a deeply uncomfortable

problematic that I can't solve alone. I ask often if what I'm saying or doing or thinking is a bit defunct or if there's a way in which I can modify what I do or what I think or the way that I behave that doesn't actively support patriarchy. It's about keeping the conversation open but at the same time, there's an awful lot of things and details that have me reproduce a phallogentrism. Just being interviewed and asked to speak logically and rationally about what a house is and how it works is to the Institute a particular kind of patriarchal response. That's just an example of how it reproduces itself behind our backs.

The family is a patriarchal structure and that's something I think that needs to be encountered and re-encountered, figured and refigured all the time, it's one of those things we'll have to keep talking about until we die. We're not going to solve it, it's a bit like capitalism; we're going to have to keep re-evaluating our position and just keep alive to the criticism.

H: I wanted to ask a bit more about the relationship between the physical structure and the social structure of the home, particularly in relation to this 'micro-institute' within your home and the different modes within it and outside it. I'm interested in how you can reprogramme those structures, using different aesthetics, and how those structures can be enabling or constraining?

G: When we kicked off in 2007 we talked a lot about 'homemade aesthetics' because we were trying to identify a method of rethinking the home where we wouldn't need anybody else's help or material support. So we wouldn't need to apply to the Arts Council in order to begin, or we wouldn't have to rely on having a joiner and a carpenter do something. So we were wondering, is there a set of aesthetic decisions that you can fabricate that would then allow you to intervene in our capitalist subjectivities? We thought let's call it 'homemade aesthetics' and let's see if the scruffy DIY aesthetic might be useful for us.

I think a tidy home is evidence of a patriarchal structure. So the untidy DIY, make-do strategies are essentially aesthetic strategies that disrupt the really powerful notions and practices that the

home is supposed to be orderly. What if the mess is not messy due to a neglect of orderliness, but what if the mess is a constructive messiness that's deliberate and that you have agency over? So we were thinking about how that might work and that happens in the way the Institute looks, it just looks a bit scruffy, a bit wonky, a bit off. It looks like maybe you've walked into a little activist space. So that kind of aesthetic has been important to us, it was really important at the beginning and now I'm not sure whether it matters that much and whether an orderliness is necessarily a bad thing. Maybe that's a sign of the creeping re-emergence of a patriarchal structure, but also I think it's something to do with age, about not being able to tolerate a messiness. I'm still thinking about that, I don't know actually.

H: Previously, when you were into the messiness, did you notice in practice how that might have influenced behavior, or the social relationships within the Institute? It's interesting how a conversation around this table here in the kitchen might be different to a conversation that operated upstairs in the Institute? Do you feel like you compartmentalise it?

G: Yeah, so I think in the Institute maybe I'd be sitting on the floor and because of the way I'd be sitting I'd be answering questions differently. But I am here, at a table, persuaded that you're interested in what I think, so that then means I'm going to perform in a particular way. Maybe it's about performance? How your subjectivity responds not only to the aesthetics of a particular context but also what you're then capable of producing and performing in that context in relation to all the little details that you think are probably not that relevant until you mention them and then you start focusing on them then it just becomes embarrassing – it's funny isn't it?

Maybe that's part of what the Institute does? It encourages me and Lena, because we're aware in ways which the kids are not aware, of being able to behave differently. Maybe the Institute encourages us to perform differently, collectively, more to do with sharing than answering. I wonder if this interview would be more of a discussion if we were upstairs

in the Institute, rather than an interview now we're downstairs at the table.

A: It is a sacred space in a way I think, from the way you talk about it, from the way that I sensed it when I went in. I don't think that's a bad thing. I go to church every Sunday and sometimes I'm thinking what is the point in this? I can think about God in any space I don't have to go into a church, I don't have to be with other Christians, I mean God is everywhere right? But then it's that act of being in that space reminds me that there is something bigger than me. You need to have a physical manifestation to be able to see into a deeper reality, I think is really interesting and really needed especially as there are so many other icons around that take you into another reality of this illusion of wealth or power that we step into.

H: I'm interested to go back to the idea of ownership because we have talked about the shift to home ownership and the challenges and contradictions with that and just before you were talking about collective listening and collective behaviour, I'm just interested in your thoughts on specifically who owns the Institute?

G: Who owns the Institute, that's interesting because from a legal perspective the Institute doesn't exist in the same way that this house exists. We never registered it as a charity or officially as an art organisation or anything like that, so legally no one owns it because it isn't anything. So that's fun for us to play with. But in terms of who feels they have a right to do something with it, how the social sculpture of the Institute operates across the family, that's much more interesting. Then you'd have to say each person in the family owns it because they've all got a way of ruining it. Any one of them could ruin it at any point. By ruin I mean the particular expression of the Institute at that moment. Like, there were times when we were supposed to speak at a conference and ten minutes before we were all ready to speak, one of them said, 'No, I'm not doing it' and he just went back to the hotel and did whatever he did.

So what I'm trying to say is you can't generalise across time with who owns it. Iris Marion Young suggests, 'there's no possibility of equality in society' and we say in the family, there's no possibility

of equality in the family. But what is possible is a full as possible recognition of difference, the different things that people have, do, think, feel.

What happens when you relate across difference is that you don't produce equality but you produce 'asymmetrical reciprocity', she called it, which is a way of saying you probably need to give up on trying to bring everything under the paradigm of equality. It's a kind of Marxian position that assumes one fine day all things will be equal, all we have to do is struggle for it. I have an enormous amount of sympathy for that and that's what I spend my life saying to most people, but given the nitty gritty and the impossibility and the messiness and the unruliness of a family so called, meaning me, Lena and our four kids aged between 16 and 2, given that that's the everyday life that we live, we feel fairly clear that equality is to be eternally postponed. So equality in terms of ownership is kind of impossible but what is possible is continuously reformulating what the Institute is, according to each of the different people in it. Iris Marion Young calls that 'asymmetrical reciprocity', but just in terms of the everyday lived experience of what it means to have agency in the Institute, I think each of the children definitely have the power of refusal and they know that. They know that they can come and say 'No' and bring the whole thing down. I hope it's not true in a way, but also the kind of insistence on equality in me wants that to be true.

A: What's your hope for the future, Gary?

G: If you're asking broadly about my hopes for the future, then no climate change or that we'd get it to a manageable level. If you're asking me specifically about the Institute, then I hope that the kids grow up and go one day, one fine day again, Neal and Gabriel meet in a pub when they're in their forties and they've got their own partners and families, however that's configured, and they go, 'Oh yeah I'm really glad mum and dad did that, yeah, yeah it was good that, anyway, what do you want to drink?' That'd be great, that'd be worth it. And for me, personally? That I can keep reminding myself to be naughty, that's the hope.

For more information about the Institute and its current activities see: www.twoaddthree.org

Illustration credits

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Authors' biographies

Alison Merritt Smith is an art producer and researcher; Hannah Marsden is a doctoral researcher and artist, both are based in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

Author's addresses

Alison Merritt Smith
alisonmerrittsmith@gmail.com

Hannah Marsden
hannahmadeart@googlemail.com