

"Signs of Life"

Why are images of artists' and writers' living spaces so nourishing to the creative person? They're images I find endlessly compelling, and whose surfaces I scan for details that might amount to some deeper understanding about the lives of their inhabitants. In his essay that explores this attraction to the artist's house as a site of display in the late Victorian era and early twentieth century, Christopher Reed posits that what twentieth-century viewers wanted in painting— a quality he refers to as "ragged," indicating the struggle of art-making— is what modernists wanted from artists, and thus from artists' houses.ⁱ We look at their interiors for reinforcement of the idea that their creativity is manifested in these spaces; we look "for a depth that reflects the psychological interiority we associate with creativity we can imagine ourselves on to."ⁱⁱ Whether they're in magazines, books or archives, I'll find myself mining these images for visual proof of the inhabitant's creativity and— internalizing this logic— hoping to notice similar signs in my apartment that would suggest the existence of my own undeniable, irrepressible, creativity.

Charlotte Gere historicizes the artist's home as self-advertisement, linking it to the custom of Sunday open houses when patrons visited artists' studios to see what they were planning for upcoming shows.ⁱⁱⁱ Gere argues that this form of self-advertisement "became the first middle-class aesthetic to challenge aristocratic tastes from below."^{iv} The same can be said for the aesthetic perpetuated by the lifestyle magazine *Apartamento* which, I would argue, has similarly had a hand in shaping the nature and quality of the images we see in advertising today. *Apartamento* is a biannual journal-sized magazine comprising hybrid written interview/ photo essay features. Its editorial statement reads: "an influential, inspiring, honest lifestyle magazine."^v The images in *Apartamento* are notoriously un-fussy, capture a range of dwellings, and could have been taken on disposable flash cameras. Images like this—chaotic and "real"— get much closer to the actual experience of living, and have become increasingly popular; the approach has even been coopted by the advertisers that can be found throughout the same magazine.

Why images like those in *Apartamento* are nourishing is also why the idea of my own living space being on display is nourishing: it is a sort of fantasy. These images are a model for making meaning of a creative life, orienting me towards romantic notions of art as a way of life— or the artist as living in their work. The specific fantasy is this: that a camera lens could land on any unassuming corner or surface of my apartment and discover a *mise en scene* in which my work and my life are so intertwined as to be undeniable... a bubbling-up of creativity that can't possibly be confined to my work... it spills out into my living space, my recycling bin, the way I sign a receipt, the grouping of

Commented [JS1]: I think you might want to start the piece with a description of a particular artist's living space that you're drawn to, and then pivot to the question: "Why do I, like many other creative people, find these images so nourishing?"

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ephemera on my refrigerator door... that I will be featured in this kind of magazine, and that these images will be mined for proof of this connection.

But this is already, in a sense, happening: for me, living in a space involves a certain toggling between two perspectives: that of my own and that of an inner, objective and unaffiliated, observer whom I will call the "inner snoop." The two perspectives work together to construct a self-perception of my own identity. It's not exhausting or clunky, this toggling. It is so natural that I don't even notice it anymore. I wonder whether others toggle like this. Conceivably, there's a way of living in which I'm not also simultaneously piecing together bits of evidence to form a coherent portrait of myself. To refrain from toggling these perspectives might be helpful during particularly chaotic periods in my life; to allow myself to *let it go, take it easy, let the clothes accumulate and the dishes pile up*. But despite my best efforts, the pile becomes yet another clue for this inner snoop— this time, a clue of the more "ragged" type— "*Claire is stressed, because Claire is creative.*" There is no contradiction or distortion of my space to the inner snoop, only a more complete image.

The premise of *Room Raiders*, which ran on MTV for two years between 2004-2006, was that one cute bachelor— armed with a blacklight— would surprise "raid" the rooms of three members of the opposite sex who had been "kidnapped" and were watching the raid live, piled into a surveillance van. In one of its more insidious traditions, the raider would rifle through the ubiquitous underwear drawer and performatively try on a bra or two. They'd also, of course, blacklight the sheets for suggestive stains. From that raid, depending on what they discovered, they'd choose whom of the three they'd go on a date with. Which meant that I, and many others of the MTV generation, always imagined my room as a space that could be suddenly subjected to a televised search, from the gaze of a potential mate, attempting to piece together my identity. In my particular case, as I shared a room with my mother for most of my teen years, I would have wanted to show the production team the invisible line that demarcated where my mother's half ended and my half began. The thought of this raider mistaking her underwear, talcum powder, or back brace, for my own would have ended me.

Whether one would have had to watch hundreds of *Room Raiders* episodes in their adolescence in order to experience this psychological toggling as an adult is up for debate. But the internal dialogue that plays out in our living spaces is undeniable. In "*What Your Stuff Says About You*," Sam Gosling breaks down the numerous ways in which one's "personality reaches out and connects to the physical world."^{vi} This involves a series of "identity claims" that are either directed towards others or directed at the self. The things we collect and the environments we create help us manage our emotions and thoughts about our identities. In other words, we are our own room raiders, using visual cues to piece together who we are and who we want to be.

Commented [JS6]: Say a little more about what each of these perspectives is, and how they're different from each other. What is the "inner snoop" looking for? What standards is it using to judge your space?

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To work, in a sense, means to live with something....to surround myself, and to flood my brain, with an idea and things related to that idea... to see the world through the lens of the idea. As I write this, I'm looking at an overturned library book being used— extremely precariously, I should mention— as a surface on my sofa to support a cup of coffee. The back of the book, "*Michel Majerus: Notes 1995*," reads: "Michel Majerus (1967-2002) left behind some 50 notebooks in which he recorded reflections, elaborated working processes, and sketched pictorial ideas. This publication presents three notebooks during a path-breaking year of his self-discovery as an artist." In his work, Majerus often combined painting with digital media and animated videos. He died tragically and suddenly, at 32, in a plane crash. The book presents a single page from the notebook on the left side of the spread, with an intricate diagram "translation" on the right side. The notebook page, often illegible, relies on the text (translation, dates, context and other annotations) that accompanies it. In other words, the photographic metadata. Which makes me wonder— what was made of Majerus' harddrive? To what extent has it been mined for clues into his process, like these notebooks?

It's safe to assume Majerus owned a Mac— according to Roxana Marcoci, he utilized Photoshop— invented in 1987 and licensed to Adobe in 1988— to design his compositions.^{vii} Mac OS X v10.0 "Cheetah" was released two years before his untimely death, at the peak of his career. It was Apple's first OS X release, and notorious for its new user interface that featured the notably "home-like" appearance of its Finder. The interface, for the most part, looked similar to what we have now. John Siracusa describes the phenomenon of the "spatial finder": "[it is] what's left when everything else is stripped away. It's the user's safety net. It's what makes the world of the computer eminently understandable and familiar— like a home."^{viii} The files and folders are represented visually in order to help users interact more easily with the computer...a simple and immediate hierarchy can be ascertained to the third-party visitor; the folders are rooms; there are rooms within rooms.

To what extent might these areas contain clues about process, threads of ideas, and signs of our creative lives? Of course they will never tell the complete story— neither will the photographs of artist's homes, which are fictitious in their own way. But can they similarly be mined for details that could amount to a deeper understanding of their inhabitants? To ask this question would suggest that I'm oblivious to the reality that our data is, in fact, mined every minute, bought and sold by tech monopolies, sifted and quantified in desperate attempts to piece together a portrait of ourselves that may be so accurate as to predict our behavior. Why let these companies— these room raiders— be the sole beneficiaries to this wealth of information? What would a snapshot of an artist's home look like, I sometimes wonder, if our preferred containers for visual storytelling were not their bedrooms, kitchens and bookshelves, but their Finders, bookmarks, "Notes," Chrome tabs, screenshots, etc.?

Commented [JS11]: Seems worth interrogating the difference between physical space and virtual space.

Commented [JS12]: Interesting

Notes:

ⁱ Christopher Reed, "What Do We Want from Artists' Houses?" *British Art Studies*, Issue 9.

<http://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-9/artists-houses>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Charlotte Gere, *Artistic Circles: Design and Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), 59.

^{iv} Gere, *Artistic Circles*, 18.

^v *Apartamento* editorial statement [footer of website]: <https://www.apartamentomagazine.com/>

^{vi} Sam Gosling, *"Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You."* Basic Books, New York. 2009

^{vii} Roxana Marcoci, "Comic Abstraction: Image Breaking, Image Making." *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York. 2007

^{viii} John Siracusa, *Ars Technica*. <https://archive.arstechnica.com/paedia/f/finder/finder-5.htm>

Claire, this is a great subject for a piece, and you do a nice job of developing the idea of this internal toggling we all do as we live in a space, as well as reflecting on what it's like to see the spaces of others. Structurally, the piece is a little jumpy, but the jumps feel logical. I'm unsure about the ending, which I think raises intriguing questions, but also feels to some degree disconnected from what comes before. At the very least, I think you would want to interrogate more deeply the differences between physical and virtual space, and also whether gleaning meaning from someone's furniture or dishes or even what's on their walls is similar to gleaning meaning from what they've written or what tabs they have open. But I like the way the ending opens the piece onto a new idea.

Having said all that, the essay could benefit from more detail, and more specific examples of spaces that have caught your eye. This is a piece about scanning images of artists' places in search of details that might yield a deeper understanding of them and their process, but paradoxically there are not many details in it. As a result, the piece feels a bit abstract and vague. Starting the essay with a description of a particular space and what you gleaned from looking at it, by contrast, would both be a way to hook the reader and would put them in your place, letting them experience the process you're talking about in the piece. And having that concrete example of how the small details of an artist's space can feel revelatory would help bring the argument to life.

A-/B+

