Photography, building and dwelling: Fiona Tan’s empty house

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In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues that ‘all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home’.¹ For Bachelard, the imagination plays a key role in this idea: people build houses with the practical intention of securing shelter, but it is through the work of the imagination that such shelters become spaces of personal and collective memory, narrative and dreams. In this view, our physical relationship to the spaces we inhabit is augmented by imaginary attachments that symbolise a range of expressive values. The result, for Bachelard, is that we constantly inhabit the home in ‘its reality and in its virtuality’.²

I shall argue in this chapter that the idea of the home as a space of physical and imaginary experience is key to the way in which dwelling is problematised in a suite of ten colour photographs entitled *Empty House* produced by Fiona Tan in 2010.³ Belying the title of the work,

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2 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 5.
3 Fiona Tan was born in 1966 in Pekan Baru in Indonesia, grew up in Australia, and currently lives and works in the Netherlands. She represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale in 2009 and has held solo exhibitions at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (2008), the SCAF Foundation, Sydney (2008), the Vancouver Art Gallery (2010), the Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau (2010), and the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (2010–11), among
the house shown in these photographs is replete with objects that range from the decorative to the functional and the disused. Having regard to such visible traces of habitation, I shall examine the imaginative response that is triggered by Tan’s imagery in order to question her portrayal of tensions between spaces that simply provide shelter and those that foster a notion of dwelling. Although the house is clearly inhabited, I shall show how Tan’s photographs form a counter-example to Bachelard’s suggestion that such signs of habitation support a notion of ‘home’.

In order to develop this thesis, I shall locate Tan’s photographs in the context of Martin Heidegger’s discussion of ‘dwelling’ in his essay ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’. First delivered as a lecture in 1951, Heidegger’s essay uses the twinned themes of building and dwelling to characterise an ethical relationship between humans and their environment. Having regard to Heidegger’s enquiry into links between building, dwelling and preserving, I shall discuss the techniques that Tan uses to portray the home as an unsettling space and show how her images raise metaphysical questions about the way in which we inhabit the world.

**Objects and interiors**

Much of Tan’s work is concerned with relationships between personal identity, historical narrative and place. Each volume in her series of artist’s books, *Vox Populi* (2006–12), for example, provides a glimpse of a particular country or city and its inhabitants. Using informal family photographs taken by people living in Tokyo, London and Sydney, or towns and villages in Switzerland and Norway, Tan builds up a series of touching, but often ironic portraits of ways in which places convey a particular lifestyle, foster social relations and cultivate others. The photographs comprising *Empty House* are pigment prints on archival paper (41.3 × 27.5 cm) and were exhibited at the Frith Street Gallery, London in 2010.

concepts of localness. Relations between personal experience and socio-historic tradition are, however, never stable in Tan’s works, and clashes between them typically undermine any clear or permanent attachment to an identifiable homeland. Forgetfulness, migration and shifting geopolitical boundaries are only some of the tropes that the artist uses for the purpose of figuring disorientation and undermining individuals’ identification with the places in which they live or have lived. As Okwui Enwezor has aptly pointed out in relation to the structure of Tan’s films, layers of open-ended narrative impose infinite perspectives on specific locations, much like the effect generated by a ‘hall of mirrors’.

In contrast to the complications of locale that arise in much of Tan’s filmic work, *Empty House* depicts a series of rooms that are visually isolated from the external world. Although windows can be seen in several images, a combination of frosted glass, net curtains and drawn blinds seals the interiors and prevents a clear view of the house’s physical surroundings. This visual compression establishes the boundaries of the home, but also conveys an unsettling sense of withdrawal. Whereas Robert Pogue Harrison argues that a house is a ‘dynamic field of interpenetration’ between interior and exterior, a space that comes alive by virtue of its openness to the surroundings, Tan’s photographs limit transparency and focus attention on shadowy corners and darkened recesses.

Objects within the house are marked by the passage of time: a bundle of letters implies a lengthy period of accumulation, dust has formed on a glass surface, the plastic in which electric fans are wrapped suggests a change of season, and the measurement of time by means of a pendulum clock contrasts with the faded colours of an adjacent poster [Plate 20]. The theme of temporality is presented under a more

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troubling aspect in the close-up of a telephone and a list of contacts from which names and numbers have been erased [Figure 10.1]. While the telephone places the house within a network of communication, the ever-shortening list implies a shrinking of the group of people with whom it is possible to communicate.

The rooms themselves are replete with spatial divisions and containing structures, ranging from walls and door frames to cardboard storage boxes and plastic bags. Within these various repositories, objects mix Asian and European histories of manufacture and design, and functional items are juxtaposed with objects that are prized for their visual attractiveness. A photograph featuring the contents of a glass-

8 This mixing of cultural expression is a recurrent trope in Tan’s work. See, for
fronted cabinet, for example, flattens the display values attaching to items as diverse as glassware, cups, napkins, ornaments and decorative trinkets [Figure 10.2]. The image contains no fixed point of interest and, instead, encourages the viewer’s gaze to range over a visual miscellany that, to use one of Roland Barthes’s metaphors, eschews the arresting force of a ‘punctum’.9

Tan employs this structure in a more compositionally complex way in a photograph that combines a range of different containing

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structures [Plate 21]. As in the previous image, depth is truncated by 
the low camera placement, and a strong vertical line simultaneously 
bisects and draws together the two halves of the frame. It is as if the 
background table and its array of ornaments are brought forward to 
the same plane as the display case containing its elaborately dressed 
doll. This house of things disorients by disturbing the viewer’s sense of 
scale and proportion: the doll dominates the scene, but is diminished in size by an adjacent tea set and a string of pearls that has been placed, incongruously, next to a wicker basket on top of the cabinet. Shiny reflective surfaces impose points of invisibility within the photograph in a way that contrasts with the sharpened layer of dust on the glass cabinet comprising the lower right corner of the image. In this case, however, there is a point in the image that both arrests the viewer’s interest and captures a feature of the work as a whole, namely the raised left hand of the doll. A clichéd gesture of nineteenth-century femininity becomes an important rebuke to the viewer: we may be invited to examine the contents of the house, but there is a point of resistance that imposes a limitation on what we might deduce from those contents and how we respond to them imaginatively. The raised hand of the doll signifies the viewer’s exclusion from the house as a place of habitation. In order to develop this idea, I want to place Tan’s photographs in the context of two contrasting trends within contemporary photography.

In his book *What Photography Is*, James Elkins discusses photographs that are ostensibly devoid of people. He argues that even in works that eschew human presence, we are confronted by photographic conventions that seek to ‘conjure people’s lives with snapshots of kitchen pantries, clock radios on night stands, televisions turned off, leaning stacks of vinyl records, avalanches of books, or dust under the bed’.

The result, he states, is that ‘most images without faces or people are actually full of people: they are places where people can find themselves in imagination’. The connection that Elkins makes between a photography of things and a photography of people presupposes an imaginative construction of ‘home’ that is reminiscent of Bachelard’s analysis that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

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Just as individuals use thoughts and dreams to imbue their own living spaces with meaning, so too viewers of other people’s dwelling spaces flesh out narratives of habitation, history and attachment. In Elkins’s account, the viewer’s imaginative response to such works consists in a reconstruction of, and temporary identification with, the lives of the absent occupiers.

It would be easy to place Tan’s *Empty House* within this visual tradition. However, I want to suggest that, in this particular case, her photographs resist such an interpretation and that this is part of their distinctive aesthetic interest and achievement. The display of objects marked by the passage of time provides no insight into the significance of the moment captured by the photographs or into the values that might attach to the objects themselves; the non-hierarchical jumble of decorative and functional items gives little idea of the interests and lifestyle of the unseen occupiers of the house; the rooms are full of the traces of human presence, yet the composition of the photographs prevents those spaces from cohering into a recognisable or comfortable living area. My contention is that the photographs fail to offer us a ground for imagining or empathising with the people to whom these things belong and that, as a result, they problematise the theme of dwelling in a particularly powerful way.

This feature of *Empty House* places the work within a style of contemporary photography that has been elaborated by Michael Fried and that contrasts with the genre identified by Elkins. With reference to works by Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth and Hiroshi Sugimoto, Fried suggests that spectatorial exclusion has become a major trope in ambitious art photography. Of the works discussed by Fried, Höfer’s unpopulated architectural spaces offer the closest analogy to Tan’s *Empty House*: they are plentiful interiors (usually public spaces), often ornately decorated, but devoid of human presence. In contrast to the imaginative recognition that Elkins finds in depictions of interiors that

bear the visual and physical traces of human life, Fried identifies an uneasy sense of detachment in Höfer’s imagery:

Despite the fact that the actual interiors are self-evidently places that in countless ways are phenomenologically keyed to the activities of incarnate human beings, the viewer of her [Höfer’s] photographs is not led to respond empathically to those keys […] but rather is induced to survey the pictures in question with a blend of heightened visual alertness and all but explicit bodily detachment.14

Fried argues that Höfer’s empty rooms emphasise visuality at the expense of the spectator’s imaginative self-placement within, or in relation to, the depicted spaces.15 He goes on to develop an analogy between these almost ‘traceless’ interiors and the pristine whiteness of the modernist art gallery, a space that Fried views as working against the embodied presence of the art viewer in a similar, though more directly physical way. From an undermining of empathic responses to Höfer’s spaces, Fried develops the idea of a quasi-physical ousting of the spectator from the depicted scenes (they are not spaces we would wish to inhabit). While this must remain at the level of metaphor as regards the relationship of the actual spectator to the image, a visual encounter with a photograph is envisaged by Fried as resonating at the level of the imagination while also suggesting an encounter with the parameters of the art gallery itself.

The interiors depicted by Tan evoke levels of physical discomfort that are similar to those found in Höfer’s depopulated rooms. A striking feature of Empty House is the absence of spaces that promote rest or repose. Devoid of chairs, sofas or beds, there is no implied arena within which the viewer might imaginatively linger. Instead, restlessness is imposed on the gaze as it moves from room to room, from object to object. While this structural feature of the images contributes to the uncanny atmosphere in the house, the photographs make an even stronger point by figuring the viewer’s exclusion at a metaphysical level: we fail to experience the house as a space of dwelling because something has gone awry with the relationships that support that

14 Fried, Why Photography Matters, p. 286.
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Notion. In this regard, we do share something with the inhabitants of the house, but this is far from the kind of imaginative reconstruction of other people's lives as described by Elkins. I have identified various ways in which the photographs unsettle the viewer by virtue of their abrupt juxtapositions of scale, their absence of visual hierarchy, their uneasy relationship to the exterior and their failure to yield a personal history. The undoing of a sense of 'dwelling' rests, however, on the impact of the final two photographs of the series. Before turning to a discussion of these images, I want to consider what is meant by 'dwelling' and, for this purpose, I turn to Heidegger’s elaboration of this idea.

The problem of dwelling

According to Heidegger, humans are beings who long to 'dwell'. At its most basic, this implies a desire to house ourselves on earth among things that we cherish. The act of building is key to the execution of this desire, yet building is not envisaged by Heidegger as an activity that is separate from dwelling. Rather, by tracing etymological links between the old and modern German verbs 'to build' (bauen) and 'to be' (sein), Heidegger identifies linguistic resonances of dwelling in the act of being: 'The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on earth, is Baun, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.'

While the notions of building and dwelling are intertwined in Heidegger's philosophy, he nevertheless makes a distinction between buildings that serve as purely functional spaces and those that are places of dwelling. He points out that we may build because we are dwellers, but that not every building has the values associated with a dwelling space.

In Heidegger's writings, 'dwelling' is a loaded term that comprises a complex set of relations. The first of those relations that I want to consider in connection with Tan's photographs concerns the act of 'preserving' or 'cherishing'. For Heidegger, building is not just an act of construction, but an ethical stance towards the environment, including

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16 Heidegger, BDT, p. 145.
both the natural world and the people and things that make up our everyday experience. This emphasis on the act of building is an aspect of Heidegger’s notion of dwelling that has provoked feminist criticism. Iris Marion Young, for example, has argued that against an allegedly universal, but actually ‘heroic’ notion of building, Heidegger posits the related, but less valuable act of preserving. Although not explicit in Heidegger’s philosophy, it is argued that the former is, in practice, gendered as male, while the latter has all the hallmarks of undervalued domestic work traditionally undertaken by women within the space of the home.18

While I agree with the historical and sociological reality of the point that Young makes about women’s association with work in the domestic sphere, I think it is misleading to view the act of preserving in Heidegger’s philosophy as an activity that is subordinate to building or that is implicitly gendered as female. On the contrary, ‘building’ and ‘preserving’ are intimately linked in Heidegger’s writings on this subject. He states, for example, that the ‘fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving. It pervades dwelling in its whole range.’19 For Heidegger, the act of preserving cannot be separated from dwelling and, hence, from building. Dwelling does not simply consist in the act of constructing edifices, but is informed by the manner in which we inhabit the premises we create. Preserving and cherishing objects (and hence our relationship to them and to the world around us) is a crucial way in which value is inscribed in dwelling.

The relationships between building, dwelling and preserving are key to the aesthetic impact of Tan’s Empty House. While the depicted interiors reveal a history of preservation in their array of objects, they also occupy a fine line between care and neglect. This point comes to the fore most forcefully in the penultimate, and most abstract, photograph of the series [Figure 10.3]. Reiterating the themes of framing and enclosure that I discussed above, the window comprising this photograph precludes any view of the outside world. In fact, the density of its different textures and frosting means that it barely functions as

19 Heidegger, BDT, p. 147.
a source of illumination. A faint shaft of sunlight is visible in the lower left rectangle, but the edges recede into shadow. The cropped rigorous pattern of the inner frames evokes the abstract figuration of a painting by Mondrian, but traces of breakage and repair reinforce the window’s materiality as an object. The glass is dirty and, importantly for the present analysis, the upper right-hand panel is broken. It bears the signs of a lengthy history of failed restoration: taping has peeled off and, in some places, has been reapplied. The broken segments can no longer be made to form a coherent surface, however, and gaps remain unsealed. This image of breakage prepares the viewer for the final image in the series.

The sole glimpse of an outdoor scene confronts us with the real ‘empty house’ of the title: a disused Shinto shrine that is devoid of sacred objects [Figure 10.4]. It is a barren space within a structure that

10.3 Fiona Tan, *Empty House*, 10 photographs (2010). Pigment print on archival paper, 41.3 × 27.5 cm
is weathered and worn. Following the image of breakage that I have just discussed, it is this neglected house of the absent divinity that undermines a notion of dwelling by calling into question what it means to be at home in the world.

I have already noted that, for Heidegger, dwelling comprises the twinned ideas of building and preserving and, as such, it implies an ethical stance to the world. In this account, the term ‘preservation’ implies much more than the cherishing of objects and becomes key to a set of relations that support dwelling. Heidegger terms this the preservation of the ‘fourfold’, a sense of belonging or ‘oneness’ between ‘earth and sky, divinities and mortals’. Julian Young notes that the ‘fourfold’

20 Heidegger, BDT, pp. 147–8.
is essentially a spatial metaphor; it connotes a terrain of habitation that is bounded by the natural elements of earth and sky, by awareness of our own mortality, and by the values (not necessary spiritual ones) that bind communities together and give them an identity. To dwell properly, for Heidegger, means to allow these four things to become present to us and, hence, to preserve the relationships that sustain that presence. It is this aspect of Heidegger’s account of dwelling that, in my view, sits uneasily with the feminist critique of ‘building’ that I mentioned above. For Heidegger, building facilitates preservation of the fourfold in so far as it allows mortals, divinities, earth and sky to ‘be’ together (they are present to each other). Far from a mastery of nature or the achievement of heroic acts of construction, ‘building’ consists in the cultivation of a more passive relation to the world or, as Heidegger puts it, ‘a distinctive letting-dwell’.

Returning to Tan’s *Empty House*, the image of the empty and abandoned shrine need not be interpreted as the erosion of a particular religious or spiritual way of life, but rather as the symbol of a breakdown in valuing (cherishing) the world and our place in it. As an image of abandonment, it crystallises the unsettling themes that I have discussed in connection with the other photographs in the suite. If this is so, however, the question arises as to what has happened to undermine the house, its contents and its shrine as a space of dwelling? Alternatively, to take up Heidegger’s metaphor, why are we left among the traces of the vanished gods?


22 Heidegger, BDT, p. 156. See also Julian Young’s description of Heidegger’s ‘guardians’ who, instead of seeking to ‘bulldoze a new order of things’, attempt to uncover the potential that already inheres in particular places. Young, ‘The fourfold’, p. 379.
From spoilation to rebuilding

So far, my interpretation of Empty House has focused solely on the content of the photographs. While, from an aesthetic perspective, this approach would be sufficient in its own right, the trajectory traced in this chapter gains further strength by contextualising the work within the history of its production. The photographs for Empty House were taken by Tan during production of her film Cloud Island, a work shown at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale. The location for Empty House, like much of the film itself, was the small island of Inujima in the Seto Island Sea off the coast of Japan. Like other nearby islands, Inujima was once a symbol of Japan’s industrial progress and housed a large copper refinery. Ten years after its construction in 1909, however, the refinery was closed following a drop in the price of copper. The crumbling and disused factory buildings remain visible on the island that is now home to an ageing population.

Inujima is at once a place of habitation and ruin, of growth and abandonment. A natural environment that was radically altered for the purposes of technological advancement has been left untended in the wake of economic pressure. This unhappy history sums up a theme that runs throughout Heidegger’s work, namely concern about the impact of industrial technologies on the environment and our relationship to it. My contention is that the unsettling imagery of Tan’s Empty House is deeply linked to broader questions concerning the way in which the environment of the house has been affected by industrialisation. The

23 Fiona Tan, Cloud Island, two-channel HD installation, colour, stereo, two HD-cam safety masters, two HD projectors, two hard disk players, two stereo amplifiers, four stereo speakers, one double-sided white projection screen 2.0 × 1.12 m, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010. Subsequently shown at the Frith Street Gallery, London (2010).
24 For further background information on Inujima and its industrial heritage, see Yuki Sumner and Naomi Pollock (with David Littlefield), New Architecture in Japan (London and New York: Merrell, 2010), pp. 70–1.
objects within the house are presented as things to which we cannot
ascribe a value in a wider context of dwelling.

It is important to note, however, that Heidegger’s suspicion about
the impact of technology on our relationship to each other and to the
environment is neither wholly negative, nor limited to the physical
impact of ‘spoilation’. Dispensing with the idea that technology is
simply a form of making or manufacturing, Heidegger conceives of a
positive and productive notion of techné as a form of ‘revealing’.26 Like
its artistic counterpart, poetry, technology is capable of functioning as
a ‘bringing-forth’ of truth, namely a revelation of Being itself. However,
it is the way in which we have used technology that has, according to
Heidegger, obscured this positive potential. Our attitude to, and use of,
technology has led us to see the world as primarily a set of resources, a
‘standing-reserve’ that is ready for exploitation. As Bernard Yack aptly
notes, this concern about the instrumental way in which we view the
world encompasses a fundamental problem of thought itself:

Heidegger is hardly so foolish as to believe that we are reaching
the point of gaining complete control over the forces of nature. But
he does believe that the instrumental understanding of the world
embedded in the modern project is crowding out all other ways of
relating to being.27

It is this ‘crowding out’ of other ways of imagining our relationship to
the world that informs Tan’s imagery and that undermines the notion
of dwelling in the photographs. It is not simply that Inujima is revealed
to be a failed technological project that negatively impacts on its ability
to serve as a space of dwelling, but rather that, for many years, there
was no other conceivable use of the island.

A change in this state of affairs occurred, however, in 2007.

26 Martin Heidegger, ‘The question concerning technology’, in The Question
Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 3–35 (pp. 12–14).
27 Bernard Yack, The Fetishism of Modernities: Epochal Self-Consciousness
in Contemporary Social and Political Thought (Notre Dame, IN: University of
Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 120. See also Don Ihde, Heidegger’s Technologies:
Postphenomenological Perspectives (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010),
pp. 34–7.
Designated a national heritage site, Inujima has received sponsorship from the Benesse Art Site Naoshima and has been redesigned as an ‘ecological art space’. Architect Hiroshi Sambuichi, who is responsible for much of the reconstruction of the island, has designed architecture that ‘recycles’ the disused industrial buildings and integrates them into the geology and flora of the island. Yukinori Yanagi, an artist who has also participated in the project, takes this process of design and integration a step further when describing the aim of the Inujima Art House project as being ‘to transform the island into art’. 

I want to suggest that the regeneration of Inujima both as an architectural space designed to support the ecology of the environment and as a forum for art viewing provides a reorientation of the theme of dwelling. We need to understand Tan’s photographs not just as a commentary on the effects of a failed industry, but also as an act of making that reflects on the recent alterations to the island and, hence, on the lives of the people who inhabit it. I am not suggesting that the regeneration of the island as a museum space should be viewed simply as a potential new resource stream or tourist attraction (although there would be nothing inherently wrong in this). Instead, my suggestion is that this combined art and architecture project reinvigorates a notion of dwelling as it applies to this particular environment. In answer to Heidegger’s problem of technology, it does so by fostering a new conception of our place in the world and our relationship to the environment.

I mentioned above Bernard Yack’s point that one of Heidegger’s criticisms of technology was that it ‘crowded out other ways of thinking’. I linked this idea to the imaginative failure inherent in the abandonment of Inujima as a productive space throughout most of the twentieth century. Art (in the form of photography and architecture) redresses this balance of thought: it recasts the island as a space of

29 See also Sumner et al., New Architecture in Japan, pp. 70–3.
dwelling by offering a way of thinking about the world that counters a valuing of the environment solely as a repository of resources available for exploitation. As Don Ihde puts it, in Heidegger’s philosophy, art and technology ‘belong to the danger and possible salvation of the same epoch of Being’, but art (as *techné*) enables us to ‘say Being’ in a way that is different from its technological counterpart.\textsuperscript{32} In other words, art is capable of fostering a set of relations between humans and the world that is not based on an instrumental attachment to the things that comprise our surroundings.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that art production (in this case photography) can be understood as an act of making that promotes dwelling. Tan’s work achieves this through the contrast it promotes between the content of the photographs (a failed notion of dwelling) and the broader context of their production (the potential attaching to restoration of the island). Towards the end of ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, Heidegger writes: ‘because it produces things as locations, building is closer to the nature of spaces and to the origin of the nature of “space” than any geometry and mathematics. Building puts up locations that make space as a site for the fourfold.’\textsuperscript{33} In a gloss on this idea, my suggestion is that *Empty House* encourages us to understand art itself as a form of ‘building’, namely a making of space within thought that prompts us to consider our relationship to the world in a new way and that allows us to dwell ‘poetically’. This approach is warranted by Heidegger’s own conclusion in ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’. He states: ‘Enough will have been gained [from the essay] if dwelling and building have become *worthy of questioning* and thus have remained *worthy of thought*.\textsuperscript{34} In this chapter, I have tried to show that Tan’s *Empty House* makes dwelling worthy of questioning in precisely this way and that, as a result, it signals the importance of art in sustaining a set of values that enable us to be at home in the world.

\textsuperscript{33} Heidegger, BDT, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{34} Heidegger, BDT, p. 158.