

Being Stuck: Between Reality and Fiction

I can't escape. In a few minutes I'll be landing in Bordeaux. Afterward I'll catch a taxi to Floirac. Seems like it's raining. From my last visit to the house in Bordeaux, I recall only a desire for the elevator to shoot toward the sky, through the clouds, toward the infinite . . .

1. Rem Koolhaas, principal of OMA and architect of the Bordeaux house. The use of the abbreviation K., with its echoes of Kafka, is adopted from Matthew Stadler, "The Story of K.," in *Considering Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: What is OMA?*, ed. Véronique Patteeuw (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003). After the death of the owner of the house, Koolhaas wrote: "The empty vessel that he leaves behind becomes the receptacle for what the rigor of his regime – fatherhood, suffering, combativeness, love – had eliminated from the family's daily life: femininity, informality, hospitality, fun." Rem Koolhaas, "Maison à Bordeaux," in *Content* (Cologne: Taschen, 2004), 375.

2. Fictional names were given to the owners of the house: José for the husband, who died in February 2002, and Marie for his wife. The house was finished in 1998, but the family moved in a few months prior to completion.

3. The transformation of the space of the house by the movement of the elevator is often discussed, but the elevator is only one of a series of elements that offer various possibilities for the manipulation and creation of space. Terence Riley refers to the empty vessel of the elevator, but also makes note of those other elements: "In the Maison à Bordeaux, major architectural elements can be manipulated. The entire twenty-five-foot-long glass facade of the main living level can be moved away electronically to transform the space into an open-air room. Furthermore, installed in the ceiling of the main living space is a series of tracks that allow sliding sunscreens to control the amount of light, hanging works of art to be moved from place to place, and a variety of richly textured fabrics to be positioned to change the atmosphere." Terence Riley, *The Un-Private House* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 28.

I know K.¹ believes that the elevator may now, after the death of José,² be a ludic space, the opposite of everything it represented during José's life in that house. But that space *was* José. How is it possible to appropriate it after his death? I am not asking about the possible ways to appropriate space, radically transforming in a thousand ways all of the spaces surrounding it, but about the impossibility of a primary space ever becoming occupied again after the death of its principal inhabitant. The countless possibilities that the house in Bordeaux offers depended on José's limited mobility, on his will, on his desire to move about his house. I cannot imagine any metamorphosis of the house now that José is dead. Not only the space of the elevator, but the whole house formally depended on José's condition.³ It was also through José's story that the house became known, that it seduced us . . .⁴ How will it seem now?

The rain only makes the journey worse. In front of us a bus pulls over and parks below the hill of the house. Several people get out, holding umbrellas and various cameras in hand. It seems today is Heritage Day, during which it is possible to visit the house in Bordeaux, recently added to a list of buildings of historic interest in France. The tourist-architect's interest in the house in Bordeaux is not limited to a curiosity about the form, the composition, the structure, the materials, the different views of the landscape from the house and of the house from the landscape, but extends to a desire to observe its mechanical elements at work, as if one only really enters the house when all of its secrets are revealed or its story told. K. speaks very little about his houses and the houses speak very little of the lives they hold within.⁵ Even after José's death, the house in Bordeaux hasn't lost its mystery and

4. There is a direct relation between the way the house in Bordeaux seduces and captures one's attention and the story that preceded its construction. Visiting it became essential for many, almost obligatory, as Herbert Muschamp reported: "The result [the house], though not yet fully furnished [November 1998], has already become a mecca, one of those rare buildings people feel they must visit to see what the present looks like." Herbert Muschamp, "Living Boldly on the Event Horizon," *New York Times* (November 19, 1998) available at <http://nytimes.com>. One visitor was Beatriz Colomina. Although contemporary architecture is not her area of study, she felt impelled to visit the house: "Seduction came through a story, almost a 'treatment,' in the film industry sense of the term. . . . She had read the story somewhere. It touched her somehow. She couldn't tell exactly why. It was as if it fed several fantasies or darker fears, as movies sometimes do. She wanted to see this movie." Beatriz Colomina with Blanca Lleó, "A Machine Was Its Heart": House in Floirac," *Assemblage* 37 (1998): 39.

5. "Koolhaas remains as discrete [sic] about the significance of his houses as the houses themselves are discrete [sic] about the lives that they accommodate." Bart Verschaffel, "The Survival Ethics of Rem Koolhaas: The First Houses by OMA," in Patteeuw, ed., *Considering Rem Koolhaas*, 164.

6. In their visit to the house in Bordeaux, Beatriz Colomina and Blanca Lleó have the following exchange: "BC: Have you noticed that they are all in their own worlds? BLL: Yes, they are all like the house. BC: The woman is in the lower house. The young kid is across the patio in the caretakers' house – I can hear her practicing piano. The oldest one is talking with a pal in the outside glass house. The man is in the glass house, with the visitors. Now and then, one of them wanders into the living room, as if to check that everything is still there, and then leaves again. . . . BLL: Or when the woman brought up the coffee and the cake, then left. BC: The house allows everyone to disappear into their worlds. It is as if the cell of Le Corbusier had been made available to all. The structure is quite striking." Colomina with Lleó, 40.

charm. I look at the countless shoes left by the entrance to avoid tracking in mud, and I follow the group of now bare-foot tourists.

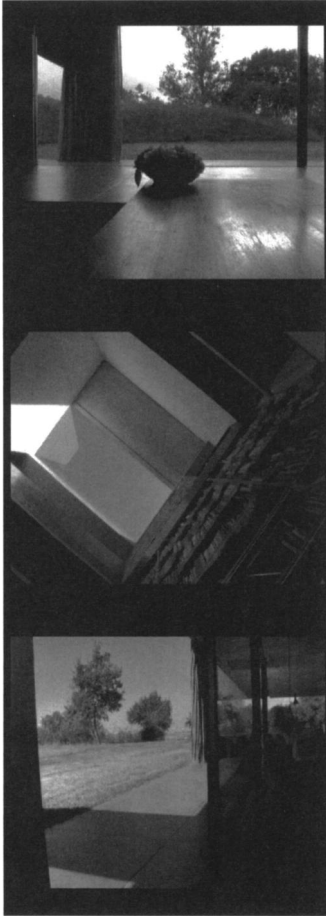
The voyeur is not interested in the image of the house in Bordeaux, which he knows from so many publications. The owners of all these pairs of shoes are not seeking the photograph of the perforated box seen from the city or the perfect shot of the infinite emptiness of the elevator but the unveiling of the several lives of the house's inhabitants, if possible in the form of a narrative that unfolds, space by space, person by person. Very little is known about the occupation of a building after it is built. Is it even possible to represent the "living experience" of a house, of any particular space? Being able to represent the living experience of a house suggests discovering how it is inhabited, unveiling all the mysteries contained within walls, ceilings, and floors. What is this kind of representation good for?

ANOTHER DAY

This house is perfect in the morning, while everyone is still asleep . . . Without José's presence, the house seems empty, almost abandoned, ghostly, like the curtains in the house's transparent level, which seem to dance. They're still drawn shut, wrapping the room in a warm light, until Guadalupe arrives and ties them back. Guadalupe is the practical side of this house, responsible for the daily tasks of cleaning and caring. It is possible to follow her everywhere and see how everything works – things that wouldn't even cross my mind – and all the little dysfunctions of the house. She moves around the house, goes up on the elevator platform, aligns the books in José's bookshelf so they don't fall, walks down the stairs, and, in the kitchen, puts on her apron, ready for another day.

Guadalupe usually prefers to go up the spiral stairs. They are so narrow that, as she goes up, using the vacuum cleaner hose as a cane, she lifts the cleaning equipment from one step to the next. Guadalupe says that the width of the stairs is just enough for her to pass with the vacuum cleaner. For Guadalupe, everything works according to the rhythm and the size of the vacuum cleaner, the bucket, and the mop.

Guadalupe lives with her husband, Vincent, in the house next door: one living room, where they watch the news, a small kitchen, one bedroom – Guadalupe's husband seems to leave everything a mess – one bathroom; one go around and that's it. From the window of the living room Guadalupe can see who arrives, but as she is small and the window high,



FILM STILLS FROM ILA BÉKA & LOUISE LEMOÎNE, *KOOLHAAS HOUSELIFE*, 2008. © BÉKA/LEMOÎNE.

she has to jump or get on her tiptoes to look out. Guadalupe only goes out on weekends.

Meanwhile, I meet the House Doctor. Since José, Marie, and their children moved into the house while it was still under construction, some mechanisms remained unresolved, and with the passing years others are presenting new problems. The Doc is responsible for the various house repairs and he generally finds a solution. Today, the joystick isn't working, among other things . . . The joystick, which opens the front door of the house from the outside, is similar to a small vertical sculpture, illuminated at night, fragile-looking. The joystick is defective, books fall, switches are coming off the wall, the elevator platform gets stuck . . . Everything seems a total disaster! The house is under permanent construction or repair.

Once a month, two workers dedicate themselves to the difficult task of cleaning the glass windows in the living room, about six meters above the ground, the skylight over the elevator, and some of the other windows. The work requires physical exercise and good balance. I love seeing the skylight over the elevator being cleaned. Little by little, the sky is unveiled, once more blue, shining, translucent, infinite . . . Now I realize that I still haven't seen Marie or the kids. They are probably not at home, or else have disappeared into their own worlds.⁶

I follow Guadalupe back and forth. She zigzags up the ramp of the patio. She says this is the best way not to be tired at the end. Vincent waters the bits of lawn in the patio. One must take special care with the area near the metallic door, because it reflects the sun and burns the nearby lawn. I watch Guadalupe, through the window, in the laundry by the kitchen, ironing. It is ten minutes to six.

Off goes Guadalupe with the vacuum cleaner in hand, vacuuming everything she encounters. First, the kitchen. She displaces the movable furniture below the kitchen bench, vacuums the drawers, the countless bottles, the ceiling, the door . . . She shakes the carpet on the patio, puts it back in place. Then on to the top floor, where she vacuums Marie's bathroom and bedroom, the elevator platform, every single corner she finds. Guadalupe decides to go to José's bedroom – "*Monsieur's bedroom*," as she calls it. I haven't seen it yet, now that José is gone. The nurse and the physiotherapist used to wait for him here. There were always family, friends – a lot of friends – around. His work desk was on the platform and, at night, guests stayed on one side and José on the other. "This house was made for him. Just for him, due to his



FILM STILLs FROM ILA BÉKA & LOUISE LEMOÏNE, KOOLHAAS HOUSELIFE, 2008. © BÉKA/LEMOÏNE.

7. "A machine was its heart," as Koolhaas says. See OMA, Koolhaas, *Living* (Basel: Birkhäuser; Bordeaux: Arc en Rêve Centre d'Architecture, 1998), 62.

handicap. Everyone was sad," Guadalupe says. Her own sadness is evident. "I never hear Madame laughing like before. She used to laugh in the evenings with their friends. But now . . . She laughs sometimes, but it's not like before." The memory of José is inevitable. I try to forget his absence by occupying myself with Guadalupe's affairs, but it's impossible to separate oneself from José; he is inscribed in the house. There is no other house like this, a house that *is* someone.

Back in the kitchen. Marie likes the chairs scattered around the kitchen, one in the middle of it. Guadalupe sighs; this makes no sense to her. But she leaves them the way her boss wants anyway, though it hinders her work . . . Between one thing and another, I laugh with Guadalupe when she recalls the day she got stuck on the elevator platform. It had jammed with something – that's why she is always worrying about the platform – and she had to climb out via the bookshelf! The stairs that unite the terrace level and the ground level are another of her preoccupations. Because the stairs are open, the lower floor floods when it rains. Guadalupe draws attention to the reinforcement iron in the concrete stairs, which is deteriorating. I had never thought about those stairs. Actually, I had never looked at this house the way Guadalupe shows it. I had always inhabited it through the images I keep in my memory. But it remains beautiful, despite its little defects and imperfections. When someone asks Guadalupe what her favorite room is, she doesn't hesitate to say that she likes them all. But she also says that she doesn't live here, she just does the cleaning . . . Nevertheless, Guadalupe is one of the few people who truly inhabits the house. She creates her own space inside it, a strictly functional space. This functional space should not be underestimated; for a house, supposedly, cannot escape its machinelike character – especially not a house with a machine as its heart.⁷

I am on the terrace and I see Guadalupe passing through the aerial footbridge from the kids' bedroom to Marie's bedroom. First she opens one door, then the other. Then she closes the first one, then the other. I forget the function of things; her movements look like choreography. Once more it rains and the wind blows. The curtains flutter. I think I see Marie putting containers by the windows to collect the water while Guadalupe explains that the windows haven't all been replaced yet. As someone has explained to Guadalupe, the house is moving due to the terrain on which it was built and, as it does, the glass in the windows cracks. In the spiral staircase there is a hole from the concrete formwork that wasn't covered. Guadalupe is very proud of the system she invented

to catch the water pouring from the hole: instead of running down the wall, it falls straight into a bucket on one of the stair steps instead. Guadalupe has worked here for six years and the construction and repairs never end. “It’s worst than the Escorial, in Spain!”

Today, the rain has stopped. The specialists, as Vincent calls them, are here to discover where the leaks are. Leaks have always been one of the house’s most serious problems. Marie has been told stories about famous architects who had problems with leaks,⁸ but I don’t think she likes the house to flood each time it rains.

I watch the house moving in automatic mode. The platform goes up. At the top level, the glass parapet sinks down until it disappears into the floor. The windows open. The blackout shade over the elevator skylight slowly opens to reveal blue sky. On the television, Jacques Tati’s *Mon Oncle*: Mrs. Arpel runs to switch on the gurgle of the metallic fish. What could be more appropriate? The huge window of the living room slides away. The cylindrical metallic door opens. The platform goes up one more time and . . . the toast pops up!

Given the bizarre automata and the serial misfortunes of K.’s house in Bordeaux, the Arpel house of *Mon Oncle* seems a shadowy forebear. “There is nothing to hide, just pipes,” Guadalupe tells me, lifting a cover in the pavement that provides access to the plumbing beneath. “All pipes are going to the big beam,” she adds. Guadalupe seems to like talking about the functional aspects of the house. She continues, “I don’t understand the house, you see, it’s suspended . . . It doesn’t have walls. I don’t know how it stands up. Really, I don’t know.” Guadalupe seems to be as fearful of the elevator getting stuck between floors as she is about the house falling down. “The house is suspended!” she exclaims several times. But Guadalupe is not the only one to have this sensation of instability, this impression of a house suspended or floating in the air like a balloon . . . “Yes. The views are magnificent,” sighs Guadalupe.

Standing inside the bathtub, Guadalupe cleans the little round windows. I like to call them “eye-windows” because they bring certain points of the landscape into focus, directing attention to specific details.⁹ The only view of the city from the opaque and perforated concrete box is through the enormous oculus on the northwest facade. From there, one sees the river and the whole of Bordeaux . . . Guadalupe undoubtedly appreciates the landscape. For her, the house is as unique as the headband Marie has in her bathroom – an enormous transparent headband, with a type of large bow half untied.

8. Colomina with Lleó, 43.

9. About the small round windows, see OMA, Koolhaas, *Living*, 94.



FILM STILLS FROM ILA BÉKA &
LOUISE LEMOÎNE, KOOLHAAS
HOUSELIFE, 2008. © BÉKA/LEMOÎNE.

Guadalupe has never talked to K. about the house – after all, she’s not the owner – but she used to say to him, joking, that she wanted a house for property she had inherited from her mother in Spain. Guadalupe, enjoying herself, tells a story about how K. used to give her his clothes to wash and iron, and then thank her, but Guadalupe used to say he had to go to Spain and draw her a house! And K. laughed! He was always very polite. With his big ears he’s aware of everything. “He listens to everything, everything, everything!” she says.

Guadalupe continues opining about the house, this time in the kitchen. “You see the kitchen . . . all in concrete! I would have preferred granite, it’s more beautiful. . . .” She moves one piece of the mobile furniture below the kitchen bench into the middle of the room to show how inconvenient it can be. “We are passing through and oops!”

We go by the garden at the back of the house to the swimming pool. Surrounded by trees, the long swimming pool reminds me of others K. has drawn. I like to think

about the swimming pool and the elevator as little fetishes in K.'s houses. This pool is particularly elegant. The water is limpid and natural, perfectly attuned with the silent landscape that surrounds it.

Back to the house . . . The exterior, eyelike porthole turns round and round and round. Night falls slowly. One can hear the crickets, the cicadas. A small breeze rustles. The night of the city is far away. I see Marie leaning on a tree trunk, wearing a red dress, her hair tied loosely. And, then, from inside, her reflection in the windows of the living room – a tenuous and distant presence, as if she no longer inhabits the house in which she unties the curtain, running it the length of the living room, where she switches off the lights and disappears.

ANOTHER EVENING

As the credits begin to roll, Alice stands up – perplexed, the room still dark – and goes to Storefront's door to get some air. Guadalupe turned out very well. Alice's imminent trip to Bordeaux had become almost an obsession, and the film seemed a good opportunity to revisit the house after José's death without ever leaving New York. She has also always been interested in films that somehow show buildings, cities, spaces, and landscapes from the various angles of their inhabitants, showing their means of occupation and appropriation over time. Photographs don't interest her so much: the image alone is boring. She needs a narrative linking the different, constructed images. If there is one essential and common characteristic between photography and cinema, it is that both bring the unconscious perception of the real to the surface, awakening the human eye to the unknown – widening its field of vision – through the mechanical lens. In this way the mechanical democratizes the visual realm. But it is cinema that creates a narrative that unifies people, landscape, and time, even when it is done in a fragmentary or disconnected manner. Cinema seduces more through fictionalized narrative than through the image itself.¹⁰

How people inhabit space has always been one of Alice's preoccupations. Watching the daily life of Guadalupe in the house in Bordeaux, a doubt surfaced: How is it possible to represent the living experience of a certain space? And what can be learned from that representation? The question of representation is not new to Alice. She has always thought about representation in architecture as a perfectly autonomous means of expression that implies the manipulation of the real and the construction of new, parallel meanings. It interests her that "architecture" is often not the actual architec-

10. Jean Baudrillard's view on photography seems more pertinent and suitable to cinema: "Photography exorcizes the world through the instantaneous fiction of its representation (not by its representation directly; representation is always a play with reality). The photographic image is not a representation; it is a fiction. Through photography, it is perhaps the world itself that starts to act and impose its fiction. Photography brings the world into action (acts out the world, is the world's act) and the world steps into the photographic act (acts out photography, is photography's act). This creates a material complicity between us and the world since the world is never anything more than a continuous move to action (a continuous acting out)." Jean Baudrillard, "Photography, Or The Writing of Light," available at <http://www.ctheory.net/articles>.

tural thing but its representation in a photograph or film, which, in the very act of representing, delimits the real. The question of representation appears related, in a very specific way, to Alice's way of looking at architecture.

Alice's doubt rose right at the beginning of the film, when the group of tourists in the house revealed that today space is inhabited and appropriated mostly through its representation, usually in images. Sitting in the small, dark, and sultry room of Storefront – “walking” in José's home again, for the first time since his death – Alice recognized that film itself is a kind of tourism. She realized that despite having once been in the house, she had the same expectations as those tourists: both to see what she already knew and to discover what really happens in the space, how it is inhabited. Until today, this seemed impossible. She has searched for so long for a representation of the appropriation of space, for a type of record that would allow her to understand the various ways of experiencing the “living space.”

Recomposed, Alice returns to the small Storefront gallery to watch the interview with K. that the film's directors had made. Her curiosity grows as she realizes two lines of inquiry in the directors' work that clearly follow the legacy of Jacques Tati. One is composed of singular moments – for example, the series of automata, the creative and malfunctioning “aberrations” that exacerbate the beauty of the house, emphasizing its character as a work of art. The second follows the various misfortunes that satirize the dysfunctions of the house and certain clichés of architecture itself, and Guadalupe is the feminine counterpart to Monsieur Hullot. “Was the bad weather a coincidence?” K. asks.

K. has always loved stories. Several of his buildings were first represented by a story,¹¹ and the house in Bordeaux is one of the best examples.¹² Inside one story other stories can be found, which, over time, are transformed into formal elements of his buildings.¹³ The story of the Moscow swimming pool is an example – or the story of the elevator, or the story of Manhattan. It is also said that K.'s drawing technique is similar to the cinematographic techniques of composing and editing.¹⁴ K. is absolutely convinced “that the work of a screenwriter and that of an architect are both processes based on editing, on the art of creating programmatic, cinematographic or spatial sequences.”¹⁵ The representation, filmic or otherwise, presents itself in this way – that is, as a fictional remaking of the process of creation by the architect, by which the representation becomes an unreal expression of the real.

“We cannot use language and writing but need to find

11. “Upon reflection, she realized this was the way we are always allowed into OMA's work, through a story. Before there were any buildings, Office for Metropolitan Architecture was launched with a novel, *Delirious New York* (a series of film clips in Charles Jencks's reading), and as OMA started to build, Koolhaas (who was a script writer before he studied architecture at the AA) kept feeding us stories. It was always the houses that provoked the best scripts.” Colomina with Lleó, 39.

12. Koolhaas's buildings continue to produce stories. For example, Herbert Muschamp writes about the house in Bordeaux as if he were telling a story: “In the outskirts of Bordeaux, Rem Koolhaas has designed a house for the millennium. It is a space for facing the unknown: for risk, mystery, surprise and suspense, a house where floors and walls disappear, and inside merges with outside in a sparkling play of reflections.” On the other hand, Muschamp turns to pop-cultural references such as *The Disappearing Floor* (The Hardy Boys series), by Franklin W. Dixon. He concludes that it is by its narrative form (as with Russian avant-garde literary formalism) that the “text” of the house in Bordeaux is futural, anticipating a time to come when we don't know where we will be or how we will be (which is his main idea of this house). Muschamp, “Living Boldly on the Event Horizon.”

13. “As an architect K. is not theory driven so much as he is plot driven. His texts, often brilliant, serve a narrative logic rather than a philosophical one, imbuing architectural choices with meaning by placing them in a story.” Stadler, “The Story of K.,” in *Considering Rem Koolhaas*, 123.

14. Colomina with Lleó, 42.

15. Rem Koolhaas, “Changing dimensions,” *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 361 (November–December 2005): 100.

16. Stadler, "The Story of K.," in *Considering Rem Koolhaas*, 129.

17. The film *Koolhaas Houselife* by Ila Bêka & Louise Lemoine was shown at Storefront for Art & Architecture in New York on April 22, 2008. More recently it was shown at the Venice Biennale. It is now available as a DVD/book from Bêka Films (2008).

another universal means, the image once again," says K. to the film directors. Alice finds this strange: K. ultimately proclaims the supremacy of the image, yet earlier he had said, "I am unwilling to abandon the role of the writer, simply because it represents other worlds, other life notions, other perspectives."¹⁶ There seems to have been a turning point in K.'s thought, when he affirms that one constant reading of the present is, after all, necessary. On the one hand, K. questions the supremacy of the seductive power of the image today. On the other, he also says that seduction is the only way to handle the double nature of representation, and points to the problem of the icon, which notoriously formalizes highly speculative ideas and divergent states of being in an "image" that represses differences. K. says they did not have to make such an image of the house in Bordeaux. But the representation was already there, in the form of fiction. Yet, the seduction remains at the expense of the story.

Alice reflects while listening to K. The film has added another episode to the story of the house in Bordeaux – a rare episode in the history of the representation of architecture. But can the film, like the narrative, overcome the power of the perfect image? The abandonment of the cinematic narrative or fiction as a means of representing architecture corresponds not only to the present-day homogenization of the image, as K. proclaims, but also nullifies the possibility of representation having its own "life." The iconic image denies the possibility of a truly critical representation and closes down critical, discursive space. Hence, the importance of films such as *Mon Oncle* as reflections on the phenomena of "living in the space of the world." Alice couldn't be happier. Watching *Koolhaas Houselife*, she knew she had to write about it.¹⁷

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