

To Build a Home

The practices and poetics of
homemaking for beginners
in the work of Martha Orbach



Victoria Mitchell

'When the shelter is sure,
the storm is good.'

Henri Bosco

Questions of Stability

Martha Orbach has been making small, delicate, artworks reflecting on the experience of making a home. Although 'home' is typically associated with security and stability, Orbach's material constructions are precarious – supported on fragile twigs or loosely assembled from odds and ends of household detritus. If these small structures reflect what homemaking feels like, we can be sure that this making is not straightforward or dependable. Rather than evoking stability, these roughly shaped visions of habitat convey a constant process of trial and error, provoking uncertainty as to whether a piece of cardboard will hold up or whether the components are sufficiently well balanced to prevent the structure from falling into a chaotic heap.

As reflections on the making of home, they are reminders that homes embody the lived experience of their formation, of their coming into being, and that this experience is itself often precarious, challenging and uncertain.

A home is not the same as a house, but the two are often interwoven and sometimes interchangeable. The more stable the structure, it is presumed that the life lived within is more comfortable and secure. The allegory of *The Three Little Pigs* comes to mind, in which the pigs that build their houses of straw or sticks are given short shrift by the wolf, whereas the pig who uses bricks to build a hearth with a chimney, which becomes the site of the wolf's downfall, is consequently saved from death. But bricks and mortar do not make a home. Rather than the grounded permanence of walls and floors it is the often unremarked, tiny instances of day-to-day actions and interactions that shape the identity we call home, accumulating resonance through memory over a period of time. The child's drawing pinned to the wall, the loose-fitting door handle, the comfortable-to-read-in chair, the shopping bags that still need to be put away, granny's vase on the mantelpiece and above all the network of relationships that share these familiar instances of daily life convey home as a place which shapes our being-in-the-world and our well-being.



Kitchen thinking

Orbach's work is exploratory and unstable. It not only reflects a homemaking practice which she likens to the debris and flotsam of a coot's nest but also, wider concerns and visions of disastrous futures, displaced peoples and mountains of rubbish. As to-do lists, bank statements and scraps of magazines

showing images of ideal homes are plastered over twigs and bandages, anxiety-provoking scenarios are inscribed. The influence of Orbach's memories, drawn from several generations, also contribute to the conflicting notions of what making a home might involve, through stories of loss, fleeing and seeking refuge relating to her Hungarian Jewish heritage and through growing up in the context of eco-building, in which homes were built of branches and straw and where experiences of home were largely unconventional.

In *Attempts at Home* and *Home Movie*, how the materials bond (or fail to bond) is critical in shaping both physical and psychological experiences of homemaking. Above all, they articulate Orbach's self-perception of being domestically incompetent. The interconnections between the materials, whether stitched, woven or entangled, reflect the interplay of different types of labour and various roles that are played by the artist in contributing to the constructing and structuring of the home. The formations which prevail seem to survive frequent local disruptions and fall just short of total

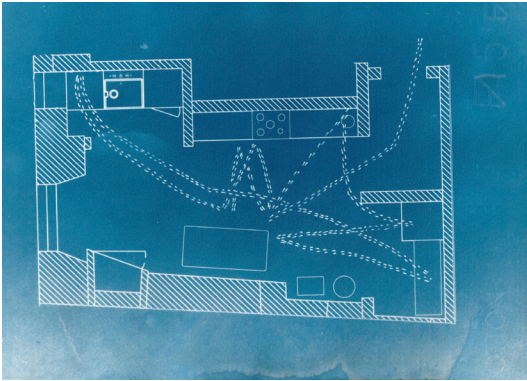
collapse. Life is more complicated than that envisaged by designers or perfectionists.



Almost a century ago, in 1926, the Viennese architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky designed what became the prototype of the Modernist fitted kitchen. Variations of her ‘Frankfurt Kitchen’, as it was called, were intended to rationalize the work processes common to core household activities and were installed in hundreds of homes.

That it is the function of the female members of the household to enact these processes, as

Schütte-Lihotzky imagined, no longer serves as a legitimate position to adopt, yet notions of domesticity and of the servile ‘domestic’ (from the Latin *domus*, house) are laced with



still-prevailing gender-specific challenges which have to be wrestled with, unceasingly. Even the simple act of making a cup of tea, perhaps while feeding the baby, as mapped out in through Orbach's cyanotype prints ('blueprints') reveals complex movements, as if combining decisiveness and indecisiveness at every twist and turn. Such processes, we conclude, cannot be entirely rationalized.

The prints convey something of a working scheme for the ‘feminist nomadic thinking’ which the writer Rosa Braidotti calls for as necessary in order to create a multi-layered cartographic model of the complexity that besets the (mis)identification of gender issues.

Kitchens and artists’ studios have much in common – material ingredients are selected, arranged, combined and thought through in the process of making. In many respects an artist’s practice is a form of kitchen thinking. Tools and utensils are often interchangeable and move between the two spaces. Often, as in Orbach’s home, the studio space and the kitchen space are within the same walls. Domestic skills, if they are not taught or inherited, have to be created through experiments which, similarly to a creative practice, are prone to failure and mess. This is domesticity in the wild, where it is healthier to imagine the potential beauty in the mess than to succumb to ideals of perfection. Ideal homes do not make ideal home life, just as perfectly ordered studios are not a prerequisite for successful art making.

Like a nest of rough twigs precariously balanced on a branch, the fear of falling or failing is ever-present to some degree. This uncertainty is especially prevalent when a new-born arrives in the 'nest' or when we set out to make a home for the first time, most likely with limited means at our disposal. While homes embody the lived experience of their formation, of their coming into being through making, the lived life is complicated. Inventiveness abounds, making do, extemporising with found objects, hovering over decisions which might be provisional or precarious - little by little and day by day we wend our way uncertainly towards a future that is not yet known. It is a performance, an on-going activity of holding on to fine threads while searching for a knot that is secure yet able to breathe freely and imbue good life into the shaping of relationships. The soup pan may burn, or the print may fail, but we must clean up as best we can and move on.

Making as dwelling

Our thinking and our feelings are shaped by the spaces in which we live. In his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking', written in 1951, the philosopher Martin Heidegger questions 'What is it to dwell?' and 'How does building belong to dwelling?'. In exploring the relationship between buildings and dwelling he argues that buildings are living beings. Building as dwelling implies both construction and cultivation, thus we cultivate habits of a lifetime in the places we inhabit, and these contain us, like buildings, and shape our thoughts. The creating of structures, which Heidegger associates with technique (from the Greek, *techné*), is also a 'making appear' through which building-as-dwelling enables an existence which is more porous and far-reaching than the bricks-and-mortar of construction. This dwelling not only designates a form of solace and of co-existence with nature but also a space which is simultaneously bounded and unbounded, and for which '(t)he boundary is not that which stops something, but rather ... that from which something *begins its presencing*'. This accords with the combination of

uncertainty and wonder in Orbach's work, as if the presence of wonder is shaped by the awkward barriers that uncertainty brings. The whiteness that unites the diversity of materials that shape the surfaces of many of the structures is transformative. The precarious is rendered poetic.

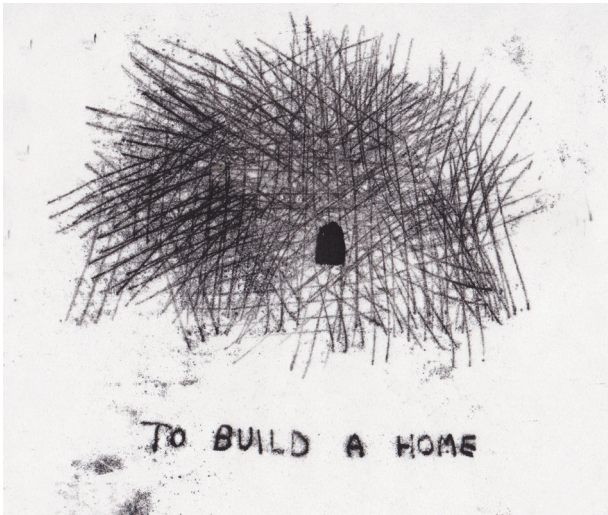
Where Heidegger shapes 'being' according to a porous relationship between bounded and unbounded, Gaston Bachelard speaks of interiority and exteriority. For both, the relationship between within and without is one of constant communication, but for Bachelard, the details of the openings of the house, as in windows and doors, are intrinsic to the osmosis whereby these named structures become embodied in inhabitation. In *Attempts at Home*, the openings are often too small and dark for the eye to enter but they invite us towards an imaginary, unknown, unobtainable place. The dream-memory image evolves through associations between the place we call home and that which shapes our being from within. For Bachelard, we live within the home, but the home is also embodied within us, shaped not only by the porous boundary between being and building

but also by the poetic imagination. 'Our house ... is our first universe' says Bachelard, and 'even the most minute part of it is capable of containing a world'.



For Bachelard, thinking is preceded by the images that are absorbed through psychic activity, and although the 'poetic image' might surface only in a flash it can be held in the mind and provoke reflection, as if

it is a place once visited. He speaks of ‘the localities of our intimate lives’ and describes the study of these as ‘topoanalysis’ (from Greek, *tópos*, place). In his book *The Poetics of Space*, this intimacy is in-formed by associations of house, home, nest and shell, wherein hidden corners such as cupboards or attics are inscribed in us as powerful ‘places of dream-memory’. Not only do we embody the home of our childhood, taking on the semblance of a body-house, but ‘we are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house’, he says (PoS:14–15). Each part of the poetic-dream of the house has its own, quite precise, behaviour and association, from dark corners in abandoned cellars to a sense of uplift that might be sensed in an attic. He draws a parallel between home and nest, in the way in which the home is a place we constantly return to, thus ‘not only do we *come back* to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest’. It draws us in to its interior, but it is also formative of the way we inhabit the world beyond. The dreaming and the non-cognitive, non-conscious nature of the emotional habitus is especially emphasized and delineated in Orbach’s structures.



Temporary, provisional, dilapidated, precarious

Homes are often provisional. Having moved between Wales, England and Scotland, the notion of a single home does not figure as a certainty for Orbach; more often home feels as if it is a place that is constantly being made and unmade. It is not always the place where we live but is perhaps in another country, or

somewhere we cannot return to. Alongside Orbach's biography, her not-for-habitation structures also draw on conversations with women at Maryhill Integration Network and notions of '*hiraeth*' – a home you long for but can no longer physically return to. Life is easily displaced or broken, by war, illness, climate change or a similar upheaval, but she says that 'even if everything is broken you still have to get up, put the kettle on and get on with it, make a home out of the fragments, amidst the rubble. The process of homemaking unravels but is patched up'.

Even in homes that are sheltered by bricks and mortar, feelings of security are often patched together, figuratively speaking, by the finest of threads or twigs. It is this precarious state that Orbach's work conveys so directly, especially as so many of the constructions evoke a sense of potential ruin or matter out of control while also just about managing to hold their ground. They evoke the unsettled experience of home making and capture the transience of their coming into being even as they might convey a scaffolding for architecture, as promising something more secure. This is especially marked in *Home*

Movie, as parts move from one testing-out to another or as elements accumulate only to collapse, but where certain aspects of strength, such as sturdy twigs, keep other elements from disaster, at least for a while. The familiar, as in a child's toy chair or kettle, invokes a wish for the stability of home even as it invites the viewer to follow the artist through a battle with self-doubt.

Trial and error become meaningful as a register of making home and home life. These are not strong constructions, but the animation, having arrived at a place of relative completeness, collapses into ruin only to recover, re-forming as a structure that might just be viable as a house for a mouse.

These *Attempts at Home* have much in common with basic shelters – homemaking stripped back to its essence. Even umbrellas and windbreaks, assembled on a beach, offer protection from the elements or from other people and serve as a temporary place of safety or a place to which to return. Homes can function on the move too, as tents in backpacks, or caravans. Young children often construct temporary home-like place-spaces

under tablecloths, or with broomsticks, old sheets and a couple of saucepans out of doors. These are all places of belonging, demonstrating an impulse to make home, where imagined necessities for survival are gathered together, often haphazardly. Emotional involvement with an environment gathers meaning as the space at our disposal becomes transformed into a 'place we call home', however improvised.

Such homes teeter on the edge of existence – entropy is apparent, and accretions of bricolage overwhelm, echoing environmental and social instability, where many are forced to attempt to construct a home in inhospitable circumstances. Collapse is often deflected, disasters are averted, but not always. It is as if sleep and dream, or perhaps art, might be the only salvation.

Towards an art of making

Nests, homes and artworks do not make themselves; birds make nests, people make homes and artists make art. The distant origin of the verb ‘to make’, which is the common denominator here, is thought to be the Proto-Indo-European root **mag*, meaning to knead, fashion or fit, perhaps in relation to the making of houses built of mud in pre-historic times. In more recent times this fashioning and fitting have evolved, via constructing and building, to take on a wide range of associations including to ‘cause to exist’, transform, produce or create.

Meanings are constantly made and remade as they are fashioned and evolve over time, whether through materials, structures or languages. The anthropologist Tim Ingold distinguishes between the craftsman and the theorist by noting how the former ‘*thinks through making*’ whereas the latter ‘*makes through thinking*’, but perhaps both are equally embodied and interconnected, like dance or movement, as actions which are performative and formative of being. The architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa noted how

'[c]onstruction in traditional cultures is guided by the body in the same way that a bird shapes its nest by movements of its body'. Likewise, homes are an embodiment of those that make them.

Parallels can be drawn between the rich combination and use of materials in *Attempts at Home* and the nest construction behaviour of birds and other small animals. In his detailed account of the constructions that animals build, the biologist Mike Hansell (2000; 2005) distinguishes several actions of building behaviour, such as 'piling up', 'interlocking' (including the Velcro-like properties of some materials, such as lichen and spider silk), 'weaving' (which might include looping and half-hitches), 'sticking together', 'modelling', 'folding and rolling', 'spinning' and 'sculpting' (associated especially with burrow-making). The manner in which the materials are brought together or shaped in *Attempts at Home* is equally varied and not dissimilar in the actions of their making, thus they might be glued, balanced, propped, stacked, interwoven, intertwined, moulded, squelched, bound or tied. These similarities reference Orbach's thinking around multi-

species homemaking and the ways in which we make homes which do not impact on the ability to thrive for other species.

The wide variety of materials that birds use in their constructions is also reflected in Orbach's mixture of pieces of wood, plaster, clay, scraps of paper, cloth, cotton wool,



twigs, grasses and all sorts of found materials which are assembled and brought together with delicate roughness. She describes the components of her *Attempts* as 'ingredients', perhaps as a cross-reference to the kitchen as sometimes being the site of making, or perhaps addressing the kitchen thinking that so often constitutes a basis for invention with what happens to be available.

For one example the ingredients include ‘thread, bath sponge, application for nursery place, tissue, seeds, emulsion – fake Pink Ground, string, pipe cleaners, immunisation plaster, cotton wool, 2019 calendar, mountboard offcut’, while for another ‘council tax bill, cotton wool, string, toothpicks, emulsion Pink Ground and Pure Brilliant White, pipe cleaners, Lidl nappy, scourer, J-cloth, mortgage statement, paper stencil, packing sheet, receipt’ are listed.

Twigs and grasses intertwine with household items, expanding the arena of practice towards a relationship with our environment and the development of an inside–outside–nature–culture dialogue. It is as if the more an intricate sense of an interior is established, the more worldly become the associations that are addressed.

Whether outside, foraged from the immediate surroundings, or inside, an assemblage swept from the kitchen table or residue accumulated from the morning’s post, all the materials used are by-products from the orbit of home life. In a not dissimilar manner, the artist Robert Rauschenberg made a series of

assemblages from material found on daily walks near his home, and about which he later said that '[i]f I walked completely around the block and didn't find enough to work with, I could take one other block and walk around it in any direction – but that was it'. Birds also find materials for their constructions in their local environment –



these may be 'natural', such as twigs, hair, feathers, moss or lichen, spider silk or mud, for example, but they can also use man-made detritus, such as in the colourful assemblages which male satin bowerbirds (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) create around their bowers to attract a mate.

Bright blue scraps of plastic, scrounged from human habitation, may be waste materials but they are 'attractive' in their new context.

Materials, even so-called natural materials, come with a history and a price. Even for birds, the amount of energy expended on the finding, retrieving and carrying of materials necessary for their bower or nest means that it pays to live in close proximity to the source. For humankind, the source of materials and the often-global chain of journeys that are involved in their 'delivery' is increasingly critical. Environmental upheavals caused by human behaviour make artists such as Orbach more attentive, not only to what is around them and what can be recycled but also to ways in which adding to the endless cycle of consumption and trade can be avoided. Artists' materials do not have to be bought. Sourcing them, like making things with them, is itself a creative endeavour.

Orbach says that 'I've realised these structures relate to my own environmental guilt', thus her 'trying to make something out of all of the by-products of my homemaking' is 'an attempt to figure what to do with all

the stuff we are responsible for ... stuff that comes with the things that we eat, the things we buy’.

One of the further consequences of the impact of environmental challenges, as witnessed by the effects of climate change, is the increasing precariousness of housing from floods, fires and draught, with



consequences, both predictable and unpredictable, for home life. The world is not outside the home, it is, in some respects, a home in itself, not just as Bachelard's *first* universe but as the *only* universe.

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To Build a Home

Glasgow Women's Library,
October 2025 – March 2026

Text *Victoria Mitchell*
Images *Martha Orbach*
Booklet design *Sam Harris*

This exhibition was made possible thanks to funding from:



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