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**Keeping House with Louise
Nevelson**

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In 1972 and 1973, Louise Nevelson built a series of sculptures that she entitled *Dream Houses*.¹ For these works, she utilised her most well-known artistic process: she accreted small bits of wood into a larger construction that she then painted a solid, unifying colour – in this case, as with most but not all of her art, black (Fig. 1). One such piece, *Dream House XXXII* (1972), is tall and narrow, topped with a gabled roof. Featuring small flaps mounted with metal hinges, it is permeable in several ways – not only because of its variously accessible multiple entrances ('doors' or 'windows' that can be open or shut), but also because its walls are shot through with apertures that make the entire enclosure riven with passages of contrasting lights and darks to create a dense, geometric visual field.

Unlike Nevelson's better known stacked-grid wall reliefs, this sculpture is displayed in the round, and its overall structure plays with the tension between rectilinear form and organic façade, as well as between protrusion and recess. Oblong shapes nestle against angular slivers, and circular cut-outs puncture rectangles, with odd jagged pieces – like shards, or fingers – fitting together to create the sense that the one might fiddle with some unexpected piece to reveal specially built compartments. Poised between a box and a column, the structure with its many accumulations and cavities issues an implied invitation to interactivity, offering itself to the viewer like a tricky puzzle to explore. But even as its dynamism is generated through its marriage of opposing forces such as concealment and revelation, *Dream House XXXII* does not mystify. It does not obscure or veil the evident labours that produced it; the wood's rough-cut edges and nailed-together fragments are forthright about their means of making.

This article examines how, in the early 1970s, Nevelson simultaneously produced and disrupted notions of domesticity with these evocative, quasi-inhabitable sculptures. As a series of alternative or non-normative dwellings, the *Dream Houses* of 1972–1973 are spaces that indicate a broader potential to reinvent the home. Nevelson's wooden, all-black *Dream House* sculptures reconfigure our understanding of gendered domestic work – that is, the tending to physical space and matter around us, as well as the affective claims we make about our familiars, not least, I claim, queer or otherwise expansive forms of kinship around gender, sexuality, and race.

Home Furnishings

Not all of the *Dream Houses* are capped with peaked roofs that give a recognisable nod to the vocabulary of domestic architecture. In one flat-topped sculpture in the series, *Dream House XLIII*, from 1973, the cobbled-together feel of *Dream House XXXII* gives way to a highly stylised, less ornate design with curving lines and symmetrical, punched-out circles that traverse the work's front and back (Fig. 2). Instead of featuring a number of mouse-sized doors along its length, the entire structure of *Dream House XLIII* opens like a cabinet or armoire, with a person-sized hollow inside, segmented by shelves. And people did go inside some of Nevelson's box-like works, or, rather, at least one person

1. There is no definitive catalogue raisonné of Nevelson's oeuvre, but according to Jean Lipman, there are thirty-seven total works in this series; Jean Lipman, *Nevelson's World* (New York, NY: Hudson Hills Press, 1983), p. 65. Seven *Dream House* sculptures, all dated 1972, were on display at Nevelson's retrospective at the Walker Art Center in 1973; see the checklist in Martin Friedman, *Nevelson: Wood Sculptures* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1973), pp. 69–70.



Fig. 1. Louise Nevelson, *Dream House XXXII*, 1972, wood, paint, and metal hinges, 190.8 x 62.5 x 42.9 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981. (Photo: Lee Stalworth) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

did, for the purpose of posing, as evidenced by a photograph of the artist herself emerging from another sculpture, swathed in a flamboyant fur coat that turns her body into an abstract, triangular shape, its striped trim echoing the notched wood on the right-hand side (Fig. 3).² Nevelson holds a black telephone receiver, as if interrupted in the midst of a call. With its peephole-like gaps, this 'phone booth' structure could promote a voyeuristic relationship between the viewer on the outside who might glimpse what lies inside, but in the photograph Nevelson's presence blocks – or cancels – any sense of a hidden interior, as her assertive, fully cloaked form overflows the sculpture. A correspondence between the artist's body and the wooden container that surrounds her is suggested, then withheld.

House as female corpus, interior as gendered unconscious: these long-standing associations have famously been plumbed by other women sculptors such as Louise Bourgeois, and Nevelson's connection to Bourgeois has been discussed in important scholarship by Elyse Speaks.³ Though many *Dream Houses* were built at a scale that encourages a correlation between human figure and domicile, some of the works in this series occupy a slighter footprint, with squatter, smaller dimensions. These include *Dream House II* from 1972; measuring about 58 by 58 by 30 cm, it could comfortably fit on a dining room table, like a perplexing fine art dollhouse with its array of external knobs, openings, and scraps of moulding.⁴ It is not a belittlement or denigration to compare the *Dream Houses* to household fixtures such as wardrobe, cabinet, or toy, for integral to Nevelson's work was her deep, abiding interest in furniture, in particular the way that such objects can hold histories and activate memories. In much of her work, she recycled architectural and household elements like cornices, banisters, bedposts, chair legs, doorknobs, packing crates, and dowels. She was compelled by the intimate bonds we forge with the things that surround us, the merging of flesh and bone with material like upholstery that can happen when one sits in a chair: both skin and fabric mutually yield. She referred to this enlivened sense of the ostensibly inanimate as 'living the livingness of life, the livingness of the livingness, and using all these things to extend this awareness'.⁵ Elsewhere, she conjures the ways that wood in particular feels 'alive' to her, as it sometimes 'screams back' as she hammers into it.⁶ The livingness of things: here Nevelson articulates a new materialist theory far in advance of the emergence of such theories in the academy, in which human bodies interact meaningfully with, and are changed by, the lively objects they encounter.

One of her earliest known drawings, in fact, is of a little girl leaning back in a wide wooden chair or settee, her legs too short to reach the ground under her (Fig. 4). The girl's face is charmingly naïve and schematic, while the furniture, including the fringed overhead lamp and the curling tops of the spindle-backed chairs, is remarkably detailed. Dated 1905 (Nevelson would have been around six years old) and signed with her birth name Berliawsky, the drawing is obviously the handiwork of a child, but one that demonstrates a precocious interest in and comprehension of interiors and perspectival spatial relations.⁷ Later drawings of chairs reveal her persistent interest in the precise proportions and specifics of furniture, the broken-apart components of which would, in a few decades, be integrated into her sculpture. Throughout her work, she was interested in maintaining the integrity of these domestic objects; materials such as chair legs, porch spindles, and spools remain spindles and spools, repurposed, yes, but not made unrecognisable. Though Nevelson is often considered an abstract artist, works like the *Dream Houses* (which cohere into the recognisable form of an abode) demonstrate how frequently she stretched, and scrambled, the boundaries between abstraction and figuration.



Fig. 2. Louise Nevelson, *Dream House XLIII*, 1973, painted wood, 228.6 x 66 x 40.6 cm. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of the American Art Foundation. (Photo: Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy Pace Gallery) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

2. For more on the significance of Nevelson's fashion choices, see Michael Stanislawski, 'Louise Nevelson's Self-Fashioning: "The Author of her Own Life"', in *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend*, ed. Brooke Kamin Rapaport (New Haven, MA and London: Yale University Press/New York: The Jewish Museum, 2007), pp. 27–37.

3. Elyse Speaks, 'Space, Gender, Sculpture: Bourgeois, Nevelson, and the Changing Conditions of Sculpture in the 1950s', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 40, no. 8, 2011, pp. 1052–1091.

4. The first *Dream House* 'began with a store-bought doll house which she painted black and decorated with her characteristic compositions of small geometric shapes', Laurie Wilson, 'Mrs. N's Palace', in *Louise Nevelson: Atmospheres and Environments*, introduced by Edward Albee (New York, NY: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art,

1980), p. 163. The toy-like scale of these smaller sculptures is a reminder that Mattel's Barbie Dream House, which was first available for purchase in 1962, provides one salient popular culture precedent for the title of Nevelson's series. I am grateful to Peggy Phelan for alerting me to this connection.

5. Dorothy Seckler, oral history interview with Louise Nevelson, June 1964–14 January 1965 and undated, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

6. Louise Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks: Taped Conversations with Diana MacKown* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), pp. 78 and 81.

7. More of her early drawings are reproduced in *Dawns and Dusks*.

8. Seckler, oral history.

9. Nevelson's biography has been amply documented; see Laurie Lisle, *Louise Nevelson: A Passionate Life* (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1990) and Laurie Wilson, *Louise Nevelson: Light and Shadow* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016).

10. Nevelson's practice of 'incorporating' previous works into new pieces – and the museological problems this destruction poses – is mentioned in Richard Marshall's essay in *Louise Nevelson: Atmospheres and Environments*, p. 9.

11. Seckler, oral history.



Fig. 3. Marvin W. Schwartz, Louise Nevelson with her sculpture, Spring Street Studio, 1972. Silver gelatin print. Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Special Collections. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © Marvin W. Schwartz, 1972.

Referring to herself as 'an architect' and 'a builder', Nevelson revelled in upending gendered conventions about the proper techniques for female artists.⁸ In her early found object assemblages, she scavenged her materials from gutters and junkyards – reusing scraps that bore the scars of their previous lives, including their felicitous incisions and their damage. (Nevelson's thorough knowledge of wood stemmed in part from longstanding personal familiarity; both before and after her Jewish family emigrated from Kiev, Ukraine to Rockland, Maine, her father worked as a woodcutter and lumber merchant.⁹) Later in her artistic career, when her economic situation allowed, she also had wood cut to order to augment her foraged cast-offs. Often cannibalising previous sculptures, she would dismantle some structures completely after they were displayed and harvest their parts to produce new pieces.¹⁰ From the beginning of her mature artistic life as a sculptor, she was drawn to wooden detritus and the remainders of carpentry projects, describing how, for one of her first such works she 'found lumber on the street that had nails and some nail holes in it and different forms and different shapes and I just nailed them together and I knew this was art'.¹¹ In other words, she did not transmute

rejected scraps into art by virtue of her aesthetic choices, but recognised something in the wood that *already presented itself* to her as usable despite it technically being classified as garbage. What might appear at first glance to be boxes and trays of junk on a studio table are actually works in progress, their component parts strictly organised according to Nevelson's overriding formal logic, with disparate pieces crucially brought even more forcefully together as a single optical field by her consistent use of monochromatic paint (Fig. 5).

Nevelson's utilisation of trash was tied to an acute appreciation of thrift cultivated from her days of financial hardship when she 'trained [herself] not to waste'.¹² As Susan Strasser writes in her history of trash making, 'trash is a dynamic category. Objects move in and out of it.'¹³ She elaborates that refuse cannot be defined by itself, for 'nothing is inherently trash', but rather must be seen in relation to human decision making. 'Trash is created by sorting', Strasser states. 'As everyday life and ordinary housework have changed over time, so has the process of defining what is rubbish, as well as the rubbish itself, the contents of the trash.'¹⁴ Nevelson's sculpture was based on processes of salvaging, gathering, and sorting as a complex rejection both of the category of trash and of the women's imperative to maintain the home, or what Pat Mainardi called in her 1969 feminist polemic on housework 'dirty chores'.¹⁵ Instead of viewing home maintenance as extrinsic to her artistic activities, Nevelson considered such procedures part of her practice, proclaiming that 'when I clean house ... I am not really cleaning house. I am building architecture.'¹⁶ Nevelson's sorting rendered her home in a constant state of flux, especially as her living space and her workspace on Spring Street in lower Manhattan blurred together in the late 1960s after she got rid of all of her non-essential belongings and lived surrounded by her art materials.

Though Arnold Glimcher states that at the age of sixty-six Nevelson 'divested herself of all material possessions', this was not technically true; these spaces still teemed with stuff. But she did, just a few years before embarking on the *Dream House* series, purge her household of objects not directly related to her art in pursuit of some new, reconfigured relationship to things, possession, and ownership by radically altering her own living situation.¹⁷ The 1967 catalogue for her Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective noted 'though it is almost entirely devoid of furniture, she nevertheless dwells among the grandeur of her own work, which crowds both studio and living areas'.¹⁸ In other words, Nevelson cohabitated with her sculptures and the materials that would become her art, keeping house in an ever-changing domestic landscape of her own creation.

Home Work

Importantly, in the time in which she was creating the *Dream Houses*, hers was not a home inhabited solely by the artist and her work. Nevelson employed a series of helpers who were integral to her process of making, most notably her live-in studio assistant Diana MacKown, who in 1962 moved in with the artist and stayed until Nevelson's death in 1988, functioning also as a companion and an archivist (she taped hours of conversation with Nevelson for the artist's book/memoir *Dawns and Dusks*). In photographs taken by Ugo Mulas of Nevelson in the mid-1960s, MacKown makes several appearances, depicted at Nevelson's side working on a piece with a can of Bright Beauty enamel spray paint in front of her and either a cigarette – or is it a nail? – gripped firmly between her lips. MacKown's right hand is a blur of motion while Nevelson presses down imperiously on a piece of wood with a single finger to stabilise it



Fig. 4. Louise Nevelson, childhood drawing, c. 1905, Louise Nevelson papers, circa 1903–1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

12. Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks*, p. 73.

13. Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), p. 3.

14. Strasser, *Waste and Want*, p. 5.

15. Pat Mainardi, 'The Politics of Housework', in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York, NY: Vintage, 1970), pp. 501–10.

16. Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks*, p. 184.

17. Arnold B. Glimcher, *Louise Nevelson* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 138.

18. John Gordon, *Louise Nevelson* (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1967), p. 9.

19. For more on the origins of this organisation, see David M. Sokol, 'The Founding of Artists Equity Association after World War II', *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1/2, 1999 pp. 17–29.

20. I discuss the fraught and contradictory nature of the Art Workers' Coalition in my *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2009).

21. Detailed technical information on the conservation of this piece can be found in blog posts by Stephanie Hornbeck, Rustin Levenson, Marlene Worhach, and others on the website of Caryatid Conservation Services; see <<https://caryatidconservation.wordpress.com/>> [accessed November 2016].



Fig. 5. Louise Nevelson's studio, c. 1965. Louise Nevelson papers, circa 1903-1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: Ugo Mulas) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

(Fig. 6). In another photograph, MacKown holds brown paper bags of groceries or supplies in front of the studio, its store-front windows a jumble of objects that might be art, but might also be an aggregation of odds and ends not yet congealed into sculpture (Fig. 7).

There are many such photos of the artist at work with MacKown at her side, which collectively add up to a portrait of their shared residence less as a space of rest and leisure than as a site of constant activity and the daily tasks of art making, which Nevelson treated like a job. In fact, starting in 1957 Nevelson was involved in the leadership of the Artists Equity Association (AEA), an organisation founded by Yasuo Kuniyoshi that agitated for artist's rights.¹⁹ (In 1962, the same year Nevelson was included at the Venice Biennial, she was elected as the New York AEA's first woman president; these dual achievements mark her increased ascendancy within the international art world.) With its efforts to improve the economic situation of artists and its arguments that artistic practice was a form of legitimate labour, AEA was a key forerunner to later groups like the Art Workers' Coalition, formed in 1969, which insisted that artists are workers.²⁰

Along with highlighting the labour of artistic production, Nevelson's *Dream Houses* can be understood as comments about the labours of domestic care, about the never-ending and repetitive acts of making that generate and sustain a home. *Dream House XLIII* was recently conserved by the Pérez Art Museum Miami, in recognition that Nevelson's thin layer of black paint on wood was not gracefully weathering the test of time; a distinct and growing network of cracks, loss, and flaking had begun to distract from the monochromatic surface.²¹ A photograph taken by the conservation and crating team shows male art handlers in blue gloves manoeuvring the sculpture into an upright position (Fig. 8). Seeing a hand gently inserted into one of the circular windows helps us mentally measure the sculpture's dimensions while it also invokes the attentions, upkeep, and maintenance that attend a work like this, long after the death of the artist



Fig. 6. Louise Nevelson at work with Diana MacKown, ca. 1965. Louise Nevelson papers, circa 1903-1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: Ugo Mulas) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

who brings such an object into the world with similar tendencies and assistance. These almost clinical penetrations recall the invitation to and ultimate thwarting of voyeurism in the telephone-and-fur-coat photo, as these gloved hands feel less like a violation of the sculptural form than an extension of its implied protocol. The *Dream House's* holes and hinged flaps become orifices to be imaginatively probed, and the intermingling of bodies and wood in this photo gestures to a desirous and tactile rather than purely optical encounter with Nevelson's sculpture. The openings in *Dream House* series raise questions about the stability of the home as a locus of fragile privacy – constantly invited to be tested, if not



Fig. 7. Diana MacKown outside Nevelson studio, c. 1965. Louise Nevelson papers, circa 1903-1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: Ugo Mulas) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

22. *Cue*, 4 October 1941, p. 16, as quoted in Glimcher, p. 54.

23. This quote comes to us second-hand, from Nevelson's granddaughter Maria Nevelson, rather than from any direct statement written by the artist herself; see Rapaport, *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*, p. 7

24. Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *ArtNEWS* 69, January 1971, pp. 22–9; Louise Nevelson, 'Do Your Work', *ArtNEWS* 69, January 1971, pp. 41, 43.

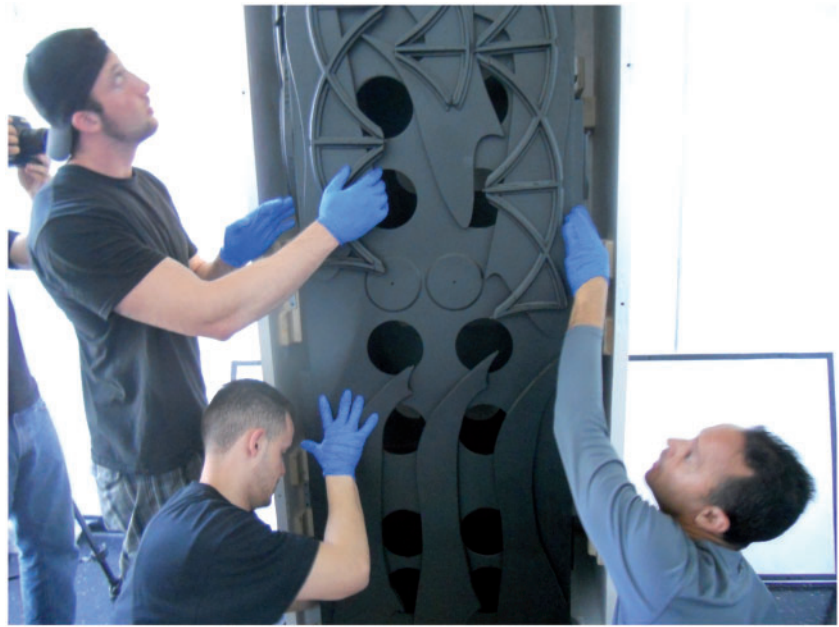


Fig. 8. Art handlers at Artex crating Louise Nevelson's *Dream House XLIII*, 1973, at Caryatid Conservation Services, Inc., 2013. (Photo: Stephanie Hornbeck, courtesy Stephanie Hornbeck).

violated, by the viewer. What is more, the serial nature of these sculptures places them on a continuum between repeatable (coded 'feminine') chores like sorting, fixing, mending, and full-scale (coded 'masculine') construction projects, moving Nevelson's work beyond any easily gendered division of labour.

Throughout her career, Nevelson struggled with the negative impact her gender had on her career and resisted the label 'woman artist'. An unsigned review from her first show in 1941 made the stakes of this gendered reception quite stark: 'We learned that the artist is a woman, in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among moderns.'²² At the same time, she did not directly participate in the organising efforts of 1960s and 1970s second-wave women's liberation, and once stated, according to a widely cited quotation, 'I am not a feminist. I'm an artist who happens to be a woman.'²³ In response to Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking 1971 article 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', Nevelson wrote a brief text that was published, alongside statements by seven other female artists, as a dossier in *ArtNEWS*. Nevelson's retort was entitled, rather sternly, 'Do Your Work', and in it she rejected any assumptions about 'the so-called nature of women' – an essentialism that Nochlin was not, in fact, promoting – and ended by dismissively stating: 'To comment further in depth would mean a line by line analysis and that of course would interrupt my art.'²⁴ For Nevelson, constant artistic production – hard work, not feminist activism – was the only path she could envision out of entrenched sexism.

Given this rejection, it is remarkable that the *Dream Houses* – structures that present idealised visions of alternative homes – were created at the very same moment that feminist debates erupted around the redefinition of housework in the early 1970s. Such debates focused with special intensity around questions of feminised domestic labour, epitomised by the 1972 formation of the International Wages for Housework Campaign and theorisations by Italian

feminist autonomist thinkers such as Silvia Federici that sought to make legible unremunerated, gendered household maintenance. Federici writes in her 1975 article 'Wages Against Housework', 'To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity.'²⁵ Federici's argument, and the broader agitation for wages for housework as a way to defamiliarise gender roles under capitalism, marks one version of a politics of the home in 1972. The anxious repetition evidenced by the *Dream House* series – nearly forty such sculptures in the span of two years – indicates an almost obsessive return to a form that places the contested arenas of female art making and homemaking into direct confrontation.

As her career progressed and her visibility increased, Nevelson became more recognised as a pioneer within the women's art movement, cited as an inspiration for younger, avowedly feminist artists as a critical figure who advocated for non-typical techniques of art making as valid avenues for women.²⁶ How, then, might we understand Nevelson's feminism simultaneously (even paradoxically) not simply in relation to a political movement rooted in a particular time – a movement that she explicitly disavowed – but rather as an aesthetic, a method of making, and, maybe, a model of relating? Nevelson's *Dream Houses*, begun just one year after her response to Nochlin, coincide with the formation of the International Wages for Housework Campaign as well as with a polemically feminist version of artistic domesticity, that of *Womanhouse*, which was open to the public in January and February of 1972. As is well known, this was a project of the California Institute of Art's Feminist Art Program under the pedagogical guidance of Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, and was realised in the context of an all-women's class as a way for the students to explore collective and individual struggles with the home as a site of feminist contestation.

The hands-on renovation of a rundown house on Mariposa Avenue in Los Angeles, in which the artists utilised carpentry techniques and learned other construction skills, was considered part of *Womanhouse's* feminist politics. As Shapiro put it, each artist was able to 'develop her own dreams and fantasies in one room of the house'.²⁷ For instance, Sandra Orgel's *Linen Closet* features a dark-haired, white, naked female mannequin segmented by shelves in a closet alongside neatly folded sheets and towels (Fig. 9). The shelves slice the mannequin at her neck, below her breasts, and through her hips, and one leg is cut off at mid-thigh, but her arm reaches forward, creating an ambiguous space in which the figure appears both to be emerging from and contained within a built-in architectural element redolent of women's work. Orgel later commented that a visitor to *Womanhouse* told her, 'This is exactly where women have always been – between the sheets and on the shelf.'²⁸ Orgel's *Linen Closet* offers a counter-proposition of sorts to the contemporaneous *Dream Houses*, a vision of domesticity in which a white female body is caught between confinement and freedom, as opposed to Nevelson's evacuation of literal figures from the home. Instead of presenting a sculptural representation of a body, the *Dream Houses* insist on an activation of the viewer's body (whatever colour she may be) as she is invited to peer into the openings in their walls. Of course, the photograph of the artist holding a phone in her fur coat complicates this assertion, as it implies that one inhabitant of the *Dream Houses* might be Nevelson herself, half enclosed and half exposed, engaged in a conversation we cannot hear.

25. Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (London and Bristol: Power of Women Collective/Falling Wall Press, 1975), p. 5.

26. Nevelson is listed on the 'Heritage Floor' of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), for instance, and figures prominently in Mary Beth Edelson's iconic feminist collage piece *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* (1971).

27. Miriam Shapiro, 'The Education of Women as Artists', *Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1972, p. 268.

28. Sandy Orgel quoted in Arlene Raven, 'Womanhouse', in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 55.



Fig. 9. Sandy Orgel, *Linen Closet*, mixed media installation from *Womanhouse*, Los Angeles, 1972. (Courtesy Sandy Orgel Crooker).

29. Caryn N. Neumann, 'Nevelson, Louise (1899-1988)', *GLBTQ Encyclopedia Project*, <http://www.glbtqarchive.com/arts/nevelson_L_A.pdf> [accessed May 2016].

30. Patricia Freeman, 'A Battle over a Legacy Pits Sculptor Louise Nevelson's Son against Her Loyal Aid', *People Magazine*, vol. 32, no. 3, 17 July 1989.

31. Joseph Disponzio, 'George Segal's sculpture on a theme of gay liberation and the sexual-political equivocation of public consciousness', in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*, ed. Harriet Senie and Sally Webster (New York, NY: Icon Editions, 1992), f. 7.

32. James Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2001), p. 287; and Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of a Queer Past* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 78.

Home Life

The comparison with Orgel's *Linen Closet* also illustrates how Nevelson's *Dream Houses* are, in part, kinds of closets, spaces that contain things both real and imagined but, more crucially, complex sites of sexual secrecy and queer disclosure. Indeed, many queer artists and art historians in recent decades have attempted to claim Nevelson as one of our own, pointing to her close relationship with live-in assistant MacKown as proof of her same-sex or bisexual proclivities. (In 1920, Nevelson married a man, Charles Nevelson, with whom she had a son and later divorced, but such conversion narratives are common in early twentieth-century queer life). An excerpt from Nevelson's entry in a queer artist's encyclopaedia attempts to account for the artist's own resistance to any homosexual identification, while shoring up claims for her queerness at the same time:

While most of Nevelson's biographers completely skip over her twenty-six-year-long relationship with MacKown, those who do mention it tend to accept the women's denial that their relationship was romantic. Nevelson reportedly stated, 'I couldn't live with myself if I was a lesbian.' However, the reality may have been more complicated. Never especially well-off and dependent on public art commissions, Nevelson may have feared the financial consequences of being exposed as a lesbian. Moreover, MacKown threatened Nevelson's estate with a palimony claim after the sculptor died in New York City on April 17, 1988.²⁹

Though the direct quote from Nevelson is hearsay, its phrasing is telling: what does it mean to not be able to *live with oneself*? What domestic splitting or psychic dislocation does that imply? When *People* magazine recounted MacKown's bitter battle with Nevelson's son for dozens of the artist's sculptures that the assistant argued were promised to her, it skirted the nature of their relationship, characterising it as one of 'ardent friendship', hinting at bodily ministrations in which the assistant functioned as 'archivist, driver, and, finally, nurse'.³⁰

During her lifetime, Nevelson's queer sexuality appears to have been, at least for some, an open secret. When in 1979 the Mildred Andrews Fund began to consider commissioning an artist to produce a public sculpture commemorating the Gay Liberation Movement, they first approached Nevelson 'precisely because of her sexual preference'.³¹ According to some accounts, she initially accepted, 'remarking almost gleefully that she had grown too old and too famous for anyone to hurt her', but was later persuaded to turn it down because 'acknowledging her lesbianism would hurt the career of her younger female lover'.³² The commission was eventually given to the straight, white male artist George Segal; after being moved around to other locations where it was repeatedly vandalised, the monument was finally placed where it was originally intended in 1992, in Christopher Street Park, near the site of the 1969 Stonewall uprising against police harassment. Segal's sculpture blandly depicts queer desire, with paired men and women in button-down shirts and trousers expressing their physical affection for each other via a demure hand on a shoulder or knee. The monument whitewashes history, in several senses: both couples appear *phenotypically* as well as *chromatically* white, and the figures become pale stand-ins for the many working-class black and Latina/o queers (including outrageously outfitted drag queens who were a far cry from the norm-core couples depicted in Segal's sculpture) who participated in the Stonewall rebellion. Such an erasure of queers of colour is sadly common to many representations of Stonewall; as African-American lesbian feminist Rev. Irene Monroe (who witnessed the night's police brutality) reflects, 'Those brown and Black

LGBTQ people are not only absent from the photos of that night, but have been bleached from its written history.³³

Though Nevelson was increasingly known for large-scale public sculpture throughout the 1970s, it is difficult to imagine what she might have produced for the Stonewall commission, given its eyebrow-raising charge that the monument ‘had to be loving and caring, and show the affection that is the hallmark of gay people And it had to have equal representation of men and women.’³⁴ This proscription demands a representational or narrative solution with a very different readability – in which ‘men’ and ‘women’ are decipherably performing acts of affection – than Nevelson’s art, an art instead occupies an in-between place that hovers at the edges of abstraction and figuration. One could argue that allowing Nevelson to pursue a more creative interpretation of the commission’s request would lead to a sculpture with abundant expressions of both care (as I have been arguing, she approached sculpture as a form of attentive house-keeping) and queerness, if it were understood that her work’s liminality, her refusal to be categorised, her resistance to represent gender as a binary system, are the queerest aspects of her practice.

Queer theorist Gavin Butt has written about the theoretical import of gossip and rumour for the writing of queer histories, because we must rely on stories that are unofficial, unwritten, and off the record.³⁵ Following his understanding about the circulation of innuendo, it is not necessary to uncover the ‘truth’ of Nevelson’s sexuality – though she did, with her abandonment of heterosexual marriage and her designation of MacKown as her primary attachment, inarguably reside within a non-standard domestic situation. That said, I do not need to know who slept in Nevelson’s bed in order to claim a queerness for her work or to understand that her art, unmoored from the distinctions between abstraction and figuration, or materiality versus metaphor, has provided queer artists with a model of unconstrained opening. Furthermore, regardless of biographical ‘proof’, Nevelson has been taken up as a queer exemplar. Nevelson’s exaggerated and self-conscious presentation of excessive femininity makes her an ideal drag and trans heroine. In 1983 queer video-maker Jamie Walters made a short comedic tape featuring a drag version of Nevelson, starring Gregory Marcangelo in a headscarf, false eyelashes, and wrinkles drawn on with eyeliner (Fig. 10). Entitled *Louise Nevelson Takes a Bath* – possibly referring to a famous 1958 *Life* magazine spread of the artist’s home in which her tub is bristling with wood – the drag character of Nevelson utters grandiose statements, some drawn directly from *Dawns and Dusks*: ‘Manhattan is a collage of sculptures’ and ‘Ah! Cubism!’³⁶ As she climbs into a hot bath in preparation for an art opening, she is reminded of ‘that one mistake I made – marriage’. Walters’ video was made under the auspices of a queer video collective in Washington, DC, Video Free Earth; it recently resurfaced and made the rounds in queer film festivals such as Outfest.

Another example of Nevelson’s queer legacy can be found in Sharon Hayes’s *An Ear to the Sounds of Our History*, from 2011, in which the artist installs rows of album covers that feature speeches and talks from historical figures; these form visual ‘sentences’ in which each cover relates in some way – oblique or explicit – to those next to it. In one iteration, Hayes positions Nevelson just above Christine Jorgenson, the first publicly out trans woman in the USA, thus aligning the artist spatially with a queer identification. Yet this contiguity was not always readable; one review of Hayes’s piece from *Art in America* stated that the ‘recording of Louise Nevelson [is] thrown in as a wild card’.³⁷ But the presence of Nevelson in *An Ear to the Sounds of Our History* raises questions about

33. Rev. Irene Monroe, ‘Dis-membering Stonewall’, in *Love, Christopher Street*, ed. Thomas Keith and Bram Christopher (New York, NY: Chelsea Station Editions, 2012), p. 101.

34. For more on the official municipal history of the sculpture, see <<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/christopher-park/monuments/575>> [accessed September 2016].

35. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). Nevelson was friendly with many of the gay male artists that formed a loose queer art scene in New York, including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Indiana; see, for example, the black and white film by Anton Perich, ‘Cage, Cunningham, Nevelson with R. Couri Hay’, 1974.

36. ‘Weird Woodwork of the Lunar World’, *Life Magazine*, 24 March 1958, pp. 70–80.

37. Paul David Young, ‘Time for Love: Sharon Hayes at the Whitney’, *Art in America*, 27 June 2012.

38. Rapaport, *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*, p. 3.

39. Anne M. Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).



Fig. 10. Jamie Walters, director and writer, *Louise Nevelson Takes a Bath*, colour video, c. 3 1/2 minutes, video by Lenny Braverman, Video Free Earth, Washington, DC, 1983. (Video still courtesy Lenny Braverman).

the potentially queer and feminist plural possessive here about claiming this artist's history as 'ours'.

Home Economics

Nevelson's uptake by feminist and queer artists underscores that a capacious understanding of both the feminism and the queerness of her art need not be read through a strictly biographical framework. The narrow focus on Nevelson's life has not, ultimately, helped us gain critical purchase on the specificity and strangeness of much of her art and its manifold associations, but rather returns it, relentlessly, back onto the artist's own body. 'Her work is, above all, a metaphorical story about herself, told in sculpture', claims the curator of Nevelson's 2007 retrospective at the Jewish Museum, adding that her art is 'a window into the artist's internal life'.³⁸ It is extraordinarily tedious to point out, still, again, constantly, that women's art is too often understood as limited to autobiographical pursuits in ways that do not apply to male artists, as art historians such as Anne M. Wagner have taken pains to elaborate.³⁹ An Ad Reinhardt painting (another artist who made extensive use of the black monochrome) is not discussed within art history primarily as a 'metaphorical story about himself'. I do not mean to rule out of hand the circumstances of the artist's biography, which inevitably affected the production of her work and delimited its conditions of possibility, but rather, to insist that Nevelson's work was primarily an inscription of her 'internal life' overlooks her considered engagement with wider concerns of materiality, the economics of housekeeping, and gendered labour.

This interpretation of her work also effaces the other world historical issues she directly thematised. In 1964 she made two sculptures that memorialised the Holocaust, entitled *Homage to 6,000,000 I* and *Homage to 6,000,000 II* (Fig. 11). In *Homage to 6,000,000 I*, the large, curving black walls of stacked boxes filled

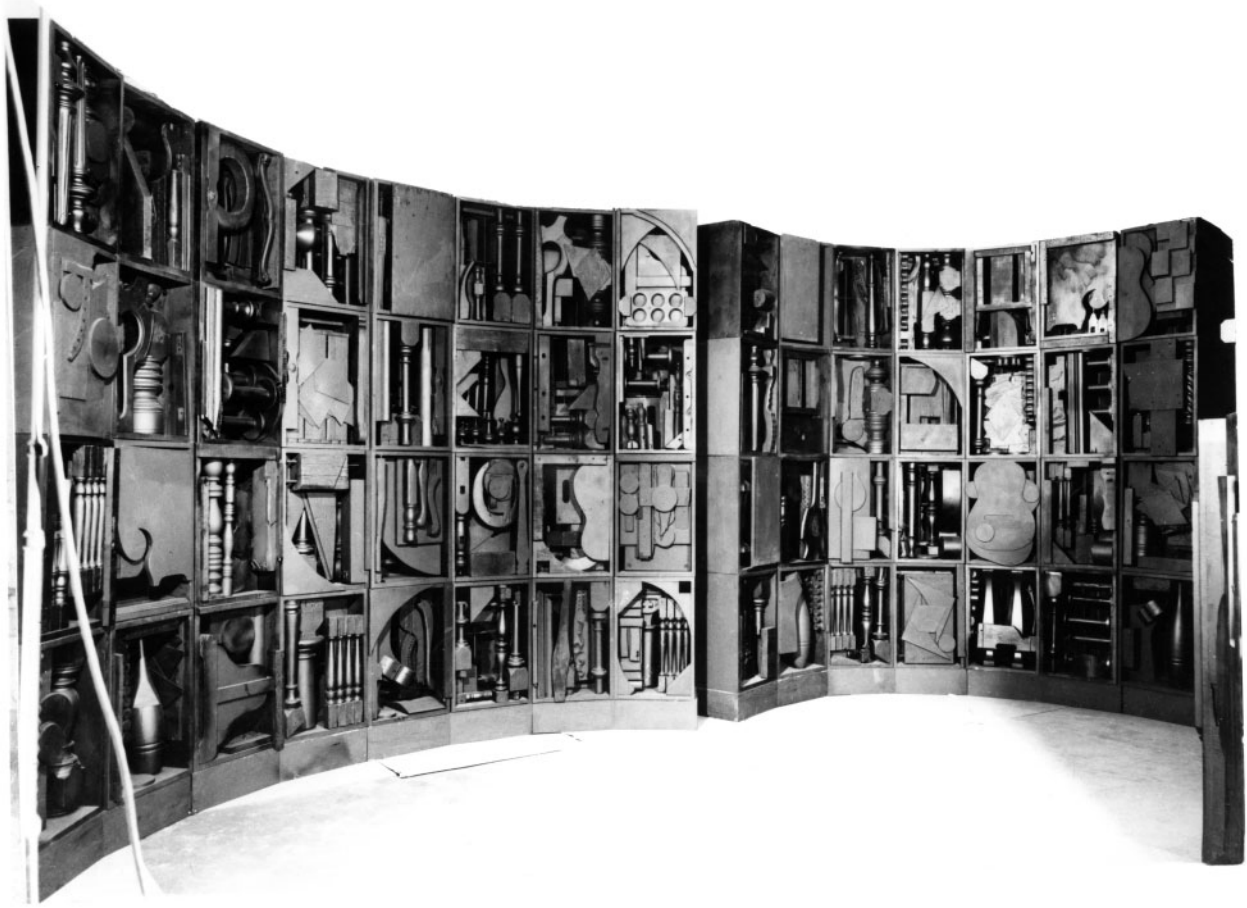


Fig. 11. Louise Nevelson, *Homage to 6,000,000 I*, 1964, wood painted black, 274.3 x 548.6 x 25.4 cm. (Photo © Randy Batista, courtesy Pace Gallery) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

with wooden implements and identifiable furniture fragments such as matching sets of turned spindles are immediately grasped as within her sculptural idiom, while they also speak to the magnitude of loss, displacement, and exile. Some of the compartments in the grid structure have a shallow composition, covered with flat wooden pieces that cover the rectangular niches like boarded-up windows. Cumulatively, the objects suggest the household goods we desperately or unwillingly discard, as well as the places one leaves behind in a hurry or the new lives one is forced to rebuild out of what is available at hand as a mechanism of survival. Its composite parts accumulate into a looming, imposing structure, with its darkness taking on a funereal cast. Though much of our understanding of its meaning is generated via its title – and more theoretical work needs to be done on how abstract art gets tethered to meaning via titles, in Nevelson and elsewhere – the Holocaust memorials utilise her formal vocabulary to convey a sense of mourning for a shattered collective home.⁴⁰

In Fig. 11 – an image of *Homage to 6,000,000 I* – a completely all-black work has patches that appear pale grey, a graphic demonstration of a significant problem that has accompanied, and distorted, many of the photographic reproductions of Nevelson's sculpture. Beyond the widely discussed challenges presented when translating a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional representation – in which photography flattens sculptures that are above all volumetric

40. In his study on artist's responses to the Holocaust via abstract art, Mark Godfrey briefly mentions Nevelson; see *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven and Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 205.

41. See, for instance, Geraldine A. Johnson, ed., *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

42. Richard Dyer discusses how film technologies were invented assuming a norm of whiteness, and how non-white faces create 'problems' for movie lighting; Dyer, *White* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1997). Black scholars have importantly insisted on making central this fundamental, and ideological, bias within the history of photography; Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

43. Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks*, p. 126.

44. Fred Moten, 'The Case of Blackness', *Criticism*, vol. 50, no. 2, Spring 2008, p. 171.

45. Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks*, p. 127.

46. Tambellini, quoted in Moten, p. 198. Nevelson definitively contrasts her understanding of blackness with Reinhardt's 'philosophical' version; *Dawns and Dusks*, p. 126.

interventions in space – the *colouration* of Nevelson's monochromatic black artwork has proven resistant to the camera and to the page.⁴¹ Of course there are images that do justice to her works (including the other photographs I chose for this essay), but in some photographs, the camera stubbornly refuses to let the details of her art register in their distinction, or her sculptures are so poorly lit that their surfaces disappear into inky shadows. And in other images, when the photographer tries to overcompensate and overexposes or uses a flash, the work's darkness is washed out, lightened, greyed; sometimes, in an astonishing inversion, her black sculptures are turned white by the camera's glare.

Some, but not all, of this failure to depict her work adequately can be accounted for due to variations in the relative matte of the black paint she used. But film and photographic technologies have historically been calibrated to accurately depict white skin rather than darker tones, and thus the inability to adequately capture Nevelson's black work is also tied to the inherent racism of the photographic medium.⁴² I make these seemingly basic points about the troubled relationship between sculpture and photography because in Nevelson's case that trouble goes beyond dimensionality, raising charged questions of the very representability of blackness, which is of course not only a colour but also a mutable, ever-shifting, and political designation.

In many interviews and writings over the course of her career, Nevelson stated her profound attachment to blackness. This is her most direct statement on the subject:

When I fell in love with black, it contained all color. It wasn't the negation of color. It was an acceptance. Because black encompasses all colors. Black is the most aristocratic color of all. The only aristocratic color. For me this is the ultimate. You can be quiet and it contains the whole thing. There is no color that will give you the feeling of totality. Of peace. Of greatness. Of quietness. Of excitement. I have *seen things* that were transformed into black, that took on just greatness. I don't want to use a lesser word.⁴³

Though it is perhaps the most frequently quoted passage by Nevelson, often appearing on wall labels next to her sculptures, that familiarity does not drain it of its lasting potency. For here the artist articulates an affirmative theory of blackness, in which black is not posited as lack or negation but rather as 'the ultimate', as 'totality'.

As Fred Moten argues in his essay 'The Case of Blackness': 'The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place.'⁴⁴ Against this background, Nevelson constellates blackness around terms of 'peace', 'greatness', 'quietness', and 'excitement'. She also talks of its capacity to invoke 'great sorrow, or great joy'.⁴⁵ Her blackness thus insists on its multiplicity; alongside 'peace' and 'excitement' (which are, after all, arguably contradictory affects), it can also have more sombre overtones, as with the Holocaust works. Moten's article circulates around his reading of a transcript of a conversation about blackness held in 1967 that included painter Reinhardt, musician Cecil Taylor, and artist Aldo Tambellini in which starkly different versions of blackness were debated; for Moten, Reinhardt's advances an almost phobic vision of 'non-colour'. Blackness for Reinhardt is reduced to a detached 'technical problem', as Tambellini puts it, and though Nevelson is not included in Moten's text, her work acts as a further retort to this construction, offering instead a dense and decades-long engagement with blackness as plentitude.⁴⁶

Arthur Danto, writing about Nevelson's relation to the monochrome, speculates: 'It is only natural to ask what meaning black had for her as a color:

night, death, mystery, the Absolute?’⁴⁷ Danto enumerates a flawed, highly limited set of choices; in his analysis, Nevelson’s blackness *has no meaning at all* but instead is wielded by her as an authorial device, a way to visually and assertively signal her own consistent hand, akin to a trademark or brand. Danto’s inadequate accounting disregards the many meanings blackness held for Nevelson. For her, blackness suffuses space as ‘the only aristocratic color’ – ‘aristocratic’ meaning majestic or regal. Against narrow definitions of the adjective ‘aristocratic’ that link it to economic elitism or class privilege, author Ralph Ellison, in a 1958 essay, describes how some women performers like Mahalia Jackson have the capacity to command a room with their presence: ‘indeed, we feel that if the idea of aristocracy is more than mere class conceit, then these surely are our natural queens’.⁴⁸ Nevelson’s affirmative theory of the aristocratic nature of blackness places it within Ellison’s – not Reinhardt’s, not Danto’s – realm, one of dignity, grace, and grandeur. Her sculpture’s luxurious vastness swells precisely from its thrift – with her application of black paint, she produces something far bigger than the sum of its parts.

No less than queer art historians, recent critical race scholars and art historians have turned to Nevelson for her nimble interpretations of blackness, including curator Adrienne Edwards, who included the artist’s sculpture in her groundbreaking exhibit *Blackness in Abstraction* at Pace Gallery, New York, in 2016.⁴⁹ Think back to the whiteness, and homo-normativity, of Segal’s Christopher Street monument and imagine instead what sort of ideological statement an unapologetically black, and queerly abstract, work by Nevelson might perform in its place.

Nevelson did make brief forays into other hues, namely white and gold (as well as some transparent plastic work), but these were never more than what Danto calls ‘temporary departures’.⁵⁰ Her first major piece in white came as an abrupt change, as she decided to shift her palette upon being invited to participate in the exhibit *16 Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959 (Fig. 12).⁵¹ This large-scale environment, entitled *Dawn’s Wedding Feast*, no doubt because it was by a woman, and because of its apparently nuptial white, generated a distinctly feminised review by Dore Ashton in which she described its ‘baroque finery – lacy and latticed like a small Victorian town with its wooden houses and daintily fenced garden’.⁵² In other words, Ashton views this work as tidy and decorative – that is, domestic in the pejorative sense of the womanly, the limited, and the local, not the expansive or universal, rather confined to the sphere of the family. Yet *Dawn’s Wedding Feast* is a muscular piece, filled with assertive gestural statements that seize the room, a mix of piston-like, gravity-defying columns hanging from above and wall reliefs that resemble a mad machine, a splayed open engine with its guts and gears exposed.

As Nevelson has stated, her work creates ‘a completeness. It’s like a marriage; you are not the total actor; you play with another actor, and my plays with the other are my materials.’⁵³ In this view, marriage is not the state-sanctified ceremonial act performed to consolidate and merge a couple’s financial resources – as one might cynically describe it in its contemporary formations – but rather an act of mutual animation that might occur between an artist and her wood, or between person and a thing. Instead of understanding this work as an oblique comment on an actual wedding (or subsequent marital discord), we might read it as a ‘union’ of unlike elements fused together by her construction techniques and monochromatic paint. Thus, such an installation might be described as a theatrical stage set or *mise-en-scène*, with matter such as wood not serving as a prop, but as a fellow actor playing a vital role in the preservation of memory, modelling different ways of coexistence with their

47. Arthur Danto, ‘Black, White, Gold: Monochrome and Meaning in the Art of Louise Nevelson’, in Rapaport, *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*, p. 39.

48. Ralph Ellison, ‘As the Spirit Moves Mahalia’, from the *Saturday Review*, 27 September 1958; reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated*, ed. and with an introduction by John F. Callahan (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1995), p. 250.

49. Adrienne Edwards, *Blackness in Abstraction* (New York, NY: Pace Gallery, 2016).

50. Danto, ‘Black, White, Gold’, p. 39.

51. Dorothy Miller, *16 Americans* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1959).

52. Dore Ashton, ‘Louise Nevelson’, *Cimaise*, no. 48, April–June 1960, quoted in Glimcher, pp. 107–108.

53. Seckler, oral history, 1964.

54. Moten, 'The Case of Blackness', p. 205.

55. Moten, 'The Case of Blackness', p. 200.



Fig. 12. Louise Nevelson, *Dawn's Wedding Feast*, 1959-60, wood painted white, installation view of *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend*, The Jewish Museum, New York, 5 May–16 September 2007. (Photo: David Heald, courtesy the Jewish Museum) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

human companions. That is to say, this art insists that how we live among things, and how they live in us, might tell us something about how to treat all kinds of others, not as possessions, but as possessed by or possessing of meaning and history. Moten advocates for works 'that register the thingly encounter, works that are both all black and in which black is conspicuous in its absence, between blackness and chromatic saturation'.⁵⁴ Nevelson's all-white sculptures – no less than her all-black ones – with their insistence on a choreographed exchange, a mutuality, between body and thing, provide one concrete answer to Moten's call. The refusal of her sculpture to register accurately in photographic representation could be viewed not as failure but defiance, for it demands to be witnessed in person, insisting that the viewer be accountable to its thingliness, without mediation.

Home Security

When Nevelson heralds the 'greatness' of the colour black, she articulates a pointed rejoinder to those who see it as degenerate or lesser. This blackness is not only significant at the level of form, as a unifying pigment, but has implications for other interpretations around what Moten terms 'social chromatism'.⁵⁵ In fact, from 1974–1985 (just after the *Dream House* series) she embarked on her *Homage to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, a black stacked wall work in the permanent collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, accepted as a gift in 1985, some years before the museum rewrote its mission to include not only black artists but also art objects by non-black artists that were inspired by or in conversation with African diasporic and African-American themes (Fig. 13). Nevelson's *Homage* is a sculpture in which an artist who is not black stands up for blackness not as 'death', as Danto would have it, or abyss, or the absence of colour, but as an infinite and bountiful resource. Nevelson was trumpeting the greatness and aristocratic nature of blackness through the 1960s and 1970s, in the years of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power activism in the USA in which African-Americans proclaimed black to be beautiful (the long quote by



Fig. 13. Louise Nevelson, *Homage to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1974-1985, wood painted black 264.1 x 199.4 x 30.5 cm. The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of the artist. 1985.6 (Photo: Marc Bernier) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Nevelson about ‘greatness’ cited above was published in 1976). In the US context, in which blackness is too often a shorthand for poverty, the underclass, and debility, the formulation ‘black is beautiful’ has an intense rhetorical force.⁵⁶ ‘At the same time, artists in the 1970s were nuancing this, including Frank Bowling’s essay ‘It’s Not Enough to Say “Black is Beautiful”’, which called for more complex formalist language with which to approach the multiplicity of black abstraction, a language that might resist the structural, endemic racism faced by black artists.⁵⁷

As a Jewish immigrant, Nevelson was not securely considered white in the context of mid-twentieth-century United States racial designations; she consistently pursued blackness not only as a pigment or paint but as a destabilised cultural construct that, when uncertainly solidified into dozens of abstracted forms of makeshift houses, pushes beyond the beautiful into a statement about the possibility of new habitats. What made the politics of the

56. For more on black aesthetic theory that elaborates on this phrase, see Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016).

57. Frank Bowling, ‘It’s Not Enough to Say “Black is Beautiful”’, *Art News*, April 1971, pp. 53–5, 82–4. Kellie Jones discusses this essay, and the circumstances of its writing, in her article, “‘It’s Not Enough to Say ‘Black is Beautiful’”: Abstraction at the Whitney, 1969–1974’, in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 154–81.

58. Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, 'March 1972 Platform', *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* (13 May 1972), p. B, supplement.

59. Alondra Nelson has discussed the importance of black women's contributions to initiatives sponsored by the Party, such as its free breakfast for children programme and its community health centres; Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 96. Robyn C. Spencer further elaborates on the significant presence of black women in the Panthers and the Party's 'malleable' gender politics; Spencer, *The Revolution has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 47.

60. The most comprehensive overview of Purifoy's work is found in Franklin Sirmans and Yael Lipshutz, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015).

61. Noah Purifoy, Ted Michel, *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* (Los Angeles, CA: 66 Signs of Neon, 1966).

'home' in the USA so urgent in 1972? One answer to that question, which focuses on white feminism and gendered domestic work, was on display that year in *Womanhouse*; another, more sharply anti-capitalist definition was formulated by the contemporaneous Wages for Housework campaign. A different answer might be found in the March 1972 Platform of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The platform included demands for freedom, or, in the statement's words, the 'power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities', as well as full employment, the end to wars of oppression, and, significantly, 'decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings'.⁵⁸ The Party, which by 1969 was estimated to have a membership of at least 60% black women, recognised the importance of housing justice – the establishment of common, decent shelter – as integral to its vision of racial justice.⁵⁹

The final plank issued in 1972 called for 'an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people, other people of color, all oppressed people inside the United States'. This demand continues to be painfully unheeded, as my own house – that is to say, my country, the fractured space of the USA – is (then as now) occupied by systemically racist policing. 'Domestic policy' is the contrasting phrase to 'foreign policy', meaning matters of the nation, the borders of which must be fortified against any threats, internal or external, to its 'safety'; my nation is filled with anger, hate, and dysfunction around questions of racism, misogyny, and homophobia. There is a distinction, of course, between the purportedly atomised 'home' and the social project of 'housing', and the terms permit different kinds of agitation and alliance, but understanding the domestic as the state reminds us that a dream house might refer both to a discrete, familial architectural structure and to an entirely recalibrated political system.

To conclude, I want briefly to situate Nevelson alongside African-American artist Noah Purifoy, in order to take seriously her art's alignment with blackness in both its aesthetic and lived formations. As mentioned, Nevelson's work has appropriately been historicised alongside sculptors such as Louise Bourgeois, but there are other artistic genealogies to consider, other spaces that she jointly inhabits. Purifoy's assemblage-based works have been understood under the rubric of West Coast 'junk art', and could seem geographically and art historically distant from Nevelson's New York.⁶⁰ His career was catalysed by the 1965 Watts rebellion, as he and fellow artists began salvaging burnt items in order to resignify the destruction around them into aesthetic, if still searing, creations.⁶¹ Purifoy, like Nevelson, had a keen interest in furniture, and designed and constructed elaborate wooden headboards; both evinced clearly modernist sensibilities as they reshaped recognisable objects into non-objective works. In pieces such as *untitled (Standing Figure)*, from around 1968–1970, Purifoy's thingly utilisation of materials harmonises with Nevelson's own treatment of wood (Fig. 14). This is column as personage, a vaguely anthropomorphic figure – a body merged with an architecture – consisting of a chequered gameboard as a surrogate face, rows of identical square knobs, and black, carved decorative flourishes punctuating the torso. Unlike Nevelson, Purifoy does not apply colour over his wood, highlighting the many textured grains and carefully considering the juxtaposition of hues of brown.

What would it mean to insist that Nevelson and Purifoy be thought of together, to consider their work as forged on parallel tracks via related sculptural materials and techniques? This speculative encounter does not propose that Purifoy influenced Nevelson in any direct or mappable way, or vice versa, though their careers overlapped for several decades and they could have encountered each other's art. Instead I suggest that the two artists rhymed



Fig. 14. Noah Purifoy, *untitled (Standing Figure)*, c. 1968-70, assemblage construction, 130.8 x 38.1 x 30.5 cm (Photo: courtesy Swann Auction Galleries) © Noah Purifoy Foundation.



Fig. 15. Louise Nevelson, *Dream House XXIII*, 1972, painted wood, 179.4 x 73.7 X 42.9 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of The American Art Foundation. 96.124 (Digital image © Whitney Museum, New York) © [2016] Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

together in their mutual pursuit of scavenged found objects and largely wood-based work, and that both understood wood to be not only the stuff of carpentry but of aliveness and arrested, but still latent, animation. Wood has been heralded for its qualities of warmth, and in addition, it has powerful capacities to expand and contract as it adjusts to different climates – to, as it were, breathe. Both Purifoy and Nevelson used wood to hammer out and reconceive of relations as they trespassed the line between furniture and sculpture. Their ‘keeping house’ is not as a synonym for making things neat, or corralling objects in their place, but a way to create room for new – even, we might say, queer – kinships. This is a family structure not dependent on blood, influence, or even acquaintance, but rather something like affinity that emerges and resonates across different subjects. Nevelson and Purifoy, placed side-by-side as queer familiars, produce

the domestic sphere not as fortress or closed-off domicile but a site of possible, if conjectural, dialogue and social exchange.

In Nevelson's *Dream House* series – which is markedly distinct from her typical sculpture – the walls keep shifting, as in the early 1970s she compulsively makes and remakes the same basic structure (Fig. 15). It is a repetition that suggests an anxiety but also a generosity; these houses are relatively undefended, perforated with gaps and a proliferation of entrances that encourage sightlines through and around them. Her art offers a dream house of permeability, of traffic in and out, a queer refusal to settle. As she brings unlike shapes together and unifies them through blackness in this series, emphasising similarities, she reveals the stakes of her commitment to the monochrome and to the act of conjoining.

I have argued that Nevelson's feminist methods of making, her queer conception of the relationality between bodies and things, and her championing of blackness are the most significant aspects of her artistic enterprise. If we take our cues from Nevelson and try to envision a 'dream house', it might be a place where formal affinities indicate, give shape to, or even prefigure emerging political solidarities across multiple axes of difference – a porous dream house that lets light flood in as it brings imaginative kin into affective relation, and holds them securely.

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