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ART SEEN: NATIONAL

## RAUMLABORBERLIN // PULITZER ARTS FOUNDATION

by Brian Prugh



Situating raumlaborberlin's *4562 Enright Avenue* is best begun literally: the Pulitzer Arts Foundation is two blocks south of Delmar Avenue and the house at 4562 Enright lies two blocks north of it. Delmar itself has come to be seen as a line dividing the city by race and socioeconomic status. An attempt to build bridges across this line, the "Delmar Divide," is at the heart of the German collective's exhibition, part of a series that connects the Pulitzer to the neighborhoods just to the north of it.



Installation view of raumlaborberlin: 4562 Enright Avenue, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2016. Photograph © 2016 Alise O'Brien Photography

The project has two parts: the dismantling of a house at 4562 Enright Avenue and the installation of materials salvaged from the house in the main gallery at the Pulitzer. The first half of the project was done in consultation with local government, neighborhood groups, and direct discussions with the neighbors of the vacant house. Other projects in the neighborhood, including the planting of new trees to replace those that once lined the residential street, grew out of these conversations. As far as social practice goes, the project seems to have been done in the best possible spirit—mobilizing the resources of a major cultural institution in collaboration with the community to create some genuine benefit for the people who live in the neighborhood.

The second part of the exhibition is an installation of components of the house, including a portion of the interior framing that recreates the volume of the house inside the Pulitzer, along with salvaged wood, bricks, furniture and other architectural elements. Two videos accompanied the installation—the first apparently shot from a vehicle driving down a neighborhood street; the second a series of interviews with people in their homes, talking about their homes, their neighborhoods, and their hopes for St. Louis. The latter video is quite moving, and provides a kind of key to the installation of the skeletal house.



raumlaborberlin, interior view of 4562 Enright Avenue, 2016. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2016. Photograph © 2016  
Alise O'Brien Photography

In the video, homeowners speak about living in their neighborhoods (both north and south of Delmar), about their ideas of home and about their hopes for the future. Each spoke from within their home—in the kitchen or living room—and the resulting montage was a particularly moving portrait of city life from *inside* the houses that comprise a neighborhood.

Walking down a city street, I encounter most houses exclusively as façades. I suppose that I know intellectually that people inhabit the spaces those façades conceal, but, for the most part, those interiors remain essentially mysterious. The strength of the video is that it opens up the homes of people I don't know and gives a sense of the human beings concealed by the brick and mortar buildings. The video doesn't show the exteriors of the individual homes, creating the sense that these interiors could fit into any one of the city homes depicted in the intercuts showing neighborhood streets.

There is a remarkable consistency to the ideas of what makes a neighborhood a good place to live (good places to eat, to get coffee, tree-lined streets, diversity, feeling safe enough to host a garden party, etc.). If the buildings in a neighborhood can seem mute and immovable, unchangeable, the residents portrayed in the video are anything but: sensitive and hopeful for finding new ways of living together.

Turning back to the installation of the house after watching the video, it seemed a wholly different object, emblematic of the larger project most visible in the video: giving form to the interior life of the city. This importantly happens behind the façades that make

up most photographs of the city, so the presentation of the house as a volume, where there is visible access to the interior, becomes very evocative.



Installation view of raumlaborberlin: 4562 Enright Avenue, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2016. Photograph © 2016 Alise O'Brien Photography

If works of abstract art like Ellsworth Kelly's *Blue Black*, Richard Serra's *Joe* and Cy Twombly's *Hero and Leander*—all in the Pulitzer's collection—are notable for giving form to the interior life of the individual, the reconstructed house in the Pulitzer stands as a visible form addressing the interior life of the city. This aspect of the installation makes it fit into the Pulitzer, alongside the most abstract of abstract art, in a significant way and it opens the earnest community action out into a more contemplative space. The show is impressive because both halves of the project flourish in their respective spaces.

The idea of contemplating the city takes many guises. Perhaps the most commonplace is to stand back and look at the buildings—to contemplate the city as an abstract geometrical sculpture filled with lights and motion and anonymous people. The city becomes an abstraction against which an individual lives a life. But there is a way in which this fundamentally misunderstands the city, and raumlaborberlin's attempt to picture the city from the inside of its dwellings out reaches for a truer image: the city, not as monolith, but as a conjunction of individual lives radiating out from their homes.

*Raumlaborberlin* at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation ran from July 29–October 15, 2016.

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