

Eva Díaz

THE ITINERANT DREAM HOUSE

Architect Albert Frey often maintained that his most successful ventures were his domestic design projects. Though internationally recognized for the many civic and commercial structures he erected throughout Palm Springs, California, it was the two homes Frey built for himself in the area that incarnated his "search of a living architecture" (as the title of his 1939 book proclaimed). His first, the 1941 *Frey House 1*, embodied his potent, utopian principles—a close integration of architectural form into nature, advocacy of new industrial materials, and an ongoing flirtation with prefabricated construction. His characteristically modernist theory of economy, of "more results for the least amount of effort," was developed beginning in the 1920s as an acolyte of Le Corbusier in Paris, as well as throughout the 1930s in collaborative writings and building commissions with the American architect Lawrence Kocher.¹

Frey's work paralleled the careers of other European émigré architects in Southern California such as Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler. In particular, the emphasis on materials such as corrugated steel and aluminum, plywood, and reinforced concrete, as well as a plain air use of space mixing indoor functions and outdoor elements (pools of water flowing through household spaces, rocks and trees jutting through interiors) became signature features of a California modernist style. In contrast to many International Style architectural corporate projects undertaken by East Coast architects, this West Coast modernism emphasized the home and its distinctive relation to SoCal's temperate climate.

Taken from its historical California context, contemporary artist Marko Lulić has recreated elements of the *Frey House 1* in various exhibitions throughout Germany and Austria. In one show at Gabriele Senn Gallery in Vienna, Lulić created a fragile steel sculpture that replicated the outline of one section of the Frey House's sliding glass doors. In its first iteration, Lulić constructed the *Frey House 1* in its entirety in the Kunsthau Bregenz gallery, producing a to-scale facsimile of the original structure. A third exhibition—the most recent—at Oldenburger Kunstverein titled *Edifice Complex* abridged the *Frey House 1* to the *Lulic House No. 1 (Weekend Utopia)*, using the gallery as a site in which to install a reorganization of the closets that Lulić designed for the Lulic House as freestanding objects. In this latter exhibition spectators were invited to inspect a small architectural model of the original house that accompanied the closet installation.

Mimicking Frey's radically reduced forms—a few intersecting plane walls protruding radially from central rectangular areas topped by a cantilevered slab roof—*Lulic House No. 1 (Weekend Utopia)* further schematizes the original building by smoothing over the Frey House's many moments of material and visual contrast. Whereas Frey used the unexpectedness of corrugated aluminum roofing abutting smooth glass ribbon walls, Lulić's structure uses planes of uniform material to roughly sketch the outlines of the house. Lulić uses a deep red shade to paint the outer areas, establishing a virtually homogeneous exterior highlighted with only brief incidents of grey, far from Frey's blending of muted materials with elements of the surrounding landscape. In presenting the total "Gestalt," so to speak, of the exterior structure, Lulić converts the already simplified forms of the original building to an emblem of modernist reduction.



Cover des Magazines / cover of
the magazine *Hintergrund*
Gestaltung / design: Dorit Margreiter
Coverfoto / cover photo: Marko Lulić

It isn't surprising that Lulić would choose Albert Frey as a subject of interest. In previous projects Lulić has mined the varied legacies of key figures of 20th century modernism, constructing a homage, for example, to Willem Reich's idiosyncratic orgone accumulator boxes (which Reich argued would channel the "primordial, pre-atomic cosmic orgone energy" essential to good sexual health).² Or, in two separate projects, Lulić has reconstructed Bauhaus architect Herbert Bayer's late-career abstract public monuments or replicated Mies van der Rohe's destroyed 1926 memorial to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Styrofoam and wood. Likewise, he recreated Walter Gropius's destroyed *Monument to the March Dead*, which commemorated the success of a 1920 general strike in Weimar that foiled the right-wing Kapp Putsch. Lulić, Serbo-Croatian by birth though a longtime resident of Vienna, has often worked to recuperate aspects of utopian modernisms, sometimes specifically related to the Yugoslavia of his youth. In his 2005 project *Modernity in YU*, Lulić reconstructed small models of colossal Marshal Tito-era abstract monuments in Yugoslavia, altering the massive scale of the originals in humble replications using modest materials such as foam core and paper maché.

Nor is it peculiar that Lulić would reconstruct a large-scale model of the *Frey House 1* inside an art gallery. Like both his Bayer and van der Rohe projects before, Lulić displaces the public, monumental function of his source object to the semi-private interiority of the gallery, pressuring the shifting meanings and social implications of sculpture in its scale and context changes. The difficult, if not persecuted, relationship of contemporary art with respect to public space or new forms of publicly-supported monumentality is no doubt partly responsible for this shift. Lulić hyperbolizes the lack of venues for public art by erecting once-communal monuments indoors using the platform of the gallery. Yet Lulić's troubling of the different phenomenological and political effects of site-specific public memorials, and even large-scale architecture itself, as it is newly framed by interior gallery contexts brings to bear central questions about the nature of such a historical recovery of modernist monumentality and its relation to public, sculptural interventions.

The artist Tony Smith once remarked of his 1962 sculpture *Die* that he didn't want to make it so large that it would become a monument, and that he didn't want to make it so diminutive it would exist merely as an object. At six feet square, the steel cube's dimension mirrored the human form. Smith argued that all sculpture ought to be "related to ordinary everyday measurements—doorways in buildings, beds, etc."³ His description still serves as a useful definition of the scale of sculpture.

Smith's positioning of sculpture against and between monumentality and the object, is, even by his own description, extremely contextual. Smith himself erected public commissions of what he termed "cified monumental expression," emphasizing how the concept of the monument is deeply connected to urban space. Linked also to the monument sited in the public realm is the notion of the memorial—the monument-sculpture-object declination Smith sets forth indicates how increasing the scale and location of a work changes its social meanings.

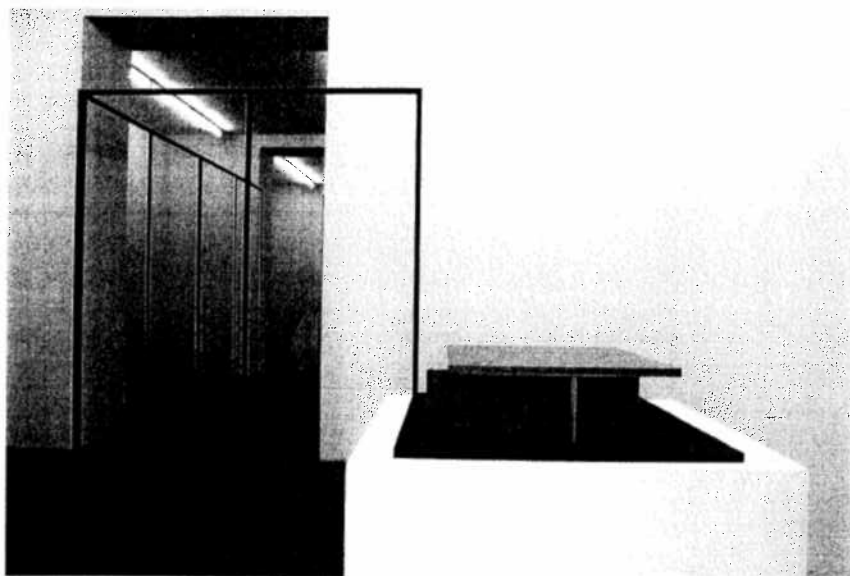
Even before Smith's consideration of them, monuments were decried. The Austrian writer Robert Musil noted in the late 1920s that monumental public art suffers from being "so conspicuously inconspicuous," and concluded that "there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument."⁴ Musil called for modern forms of address in public sculpture, facetiously appealing for modern, attention-getting monuments outfitted by the latest gimmicks of advertising—rotating, animated sculptures branded with logos. Only then would sculptors "comprehend our age of noise and movement."

In Musil's example, the overlooked, "inconspicuous" public monuments of equestrian heroes or groupings of allegorical marble figures plopped into a central plaza repel attention in their ubiquity. Modernist alternatives to such monuments with their conceits of public edification and remembrance frequently adopted the visual language of formal reduction in their dynamic use of non-representational elements. This was part of a larger constructivist project of using design to impel spectators' vision toward a close attention to the constitution of form both in art and in the world at large. Yet abstraction in public sculpture became reduced to a decorative function

as the discursive field around the economy of formal means began to reinforce a category of abstract “space” for sculpture rather than seeing public sculpture as a site of social relations. Non-referential art always runs the risk of becoming ornamental if it does not argue its stake in concentrated vision as a social project of attentiveness to habits of perception more broadly.

Lulić, like Smith and Musil, probes how available a notion of monumentality can be, particularly when it is framed by the site of the gallery. In his Beyer, van der Rohe, and Marshal Tito projects, Lulić’s monuments were themselves relocated inside. Lulić pushes this framing to an almost exaggerated degree with his work on Frey, using the gallery as an architecture which itself houses the architecture of the *Lulic House No. 1 (Weekend Utopia)*. In this expanded field, anything can be brought into the visual (and generally, though not in this case, economic) consumption of art-contexts.

One of Lulić’s earlier projects on the *Frey House 1, The Edifice Complex*, shared its title with architectural critic Deyan Sudjic’s recent book on the spectacularization of contemporary architecture. In particular, Sudjic gauges the increasing trend of architecture to represent itself as a picture, divorced from users’ needs or experiences. As he writes of projects such as Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, “Form in this sense could be seen to follow not function, but image.”¹⁵ The increasing monumentality of architecture’s scale, particularly evident in museum design, has encouraged a parallel increase in the scale of the art it houses. Indeed, as was apparent at the Guggenheim Bilbao, only an art sized at the monumental scale of Richard Serra’s massive nearly 100 foot long steel work “Snake” can comfortably inhabit the portentous spaces of contemporary museum architecture.



Lulic House No. 1 (Weekend Utopia) – Modell silber / model silver, 2006
Ausstellungsansicht / exhibition view *Luft, Licht – Gute Aussicht /*
Air, Light—Great View, Gabriele Senn Galerie, Wien / Vienna, 2006

Sudjic’s claim that the human scale of the museum has been overcharged by its need to house ever-greater works is pointed to in Lulić’s nesting of the *Frey House 1*. Lulić constructs an architecture that circulates as an artwork, traveling from venue to venue; a building that is itself housed within the greater architecture of the museum. Now marked as an artwork, yet still at the same scale as the Frey original, the Lulić House appropriates the conditions of sculpture in the airplane hanger super-scale space of the contemporary art gallery. Breaking the circuit of circulation that compels artworks to behave as consumer objects as they move through the field of venues of public display and ultimately into private hands as they are sold, Lulić returns architecture to a livable scale and environment. In an added twist, Lulić, like Frey, intends to use the house as both his private residence as well as for an artist and critic residency program, relocating it at the conclusion of the exhibition to a lot on the Croatian coastline in Pula, Istria.

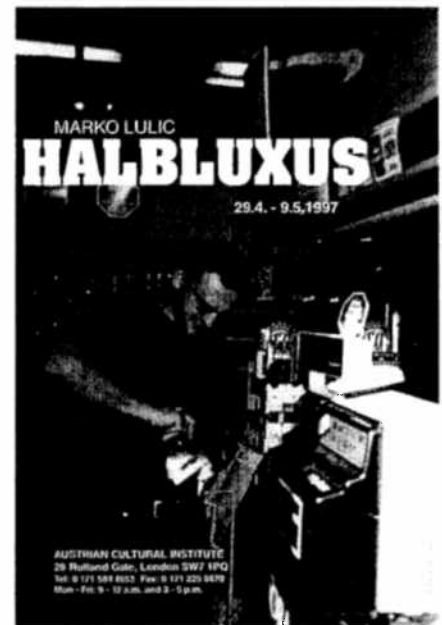
That the entire *Frey House 1* can be comfortably accommodated in a contemporary art venue says much to support the apparent outmodedness of claims of modernist architecture to institute modestly-scaled projects. In par-

ticular, much of Albert Frey's mentor Le Corbusier's career attempted to re-envision architecture in relation to human form. Like Tony Smith's notion of *Die* as a module for human scale, Le Corbusier used his own system of measure relative to the body, *Le Modulor*, as a template for keeping the proportions of architectural space relative to user function. And indeed, the scale of the *Frey House 1* is exceedingly unpretentious, using an open plan and broad expanses of glass to lend an appearance of spaciousness.

The diminutive scale of the house also hints at Frey's ideal of portable construction, though Lulić's work on the House emphasizes features that Frey's work with Kocher intimated but never fully addressed—prefab construction and plans towards increasingly mobile houses. R. Buckminster Fuller, a rough contemporary of Frey's, advocated for forms of mobility in home construction that would account for what he argued was the fundamentally nomadic condition of modern life. Assembling what he termed the "Dymaxion" homes as so-called "autonomous dwelling machines," Fuller envisioned homes that would arrive on trucks to their temporary sites with everything preassembled, furniture, plumbing, electricity, etc. Philosopher Ernst Bloch noted of such constructions a "motif of escape," implying a fundamental unease in modern architecture with non-functional aspects such as site or local context.⁶ As he wrote, "Today, in many places, houses look as if they were ready to travel. Though they are unadorned, or precisely because of that, they express their farewell. Their interior is bright and sterile like hospital rooms, the exterior looks like boxes on top of mobile poles, but also like ships... and as ships they like to disappear."⁷

The Lulić House is designed to move, and in this sense even its end destination is just a momentary stop on a chain of proliferating meanings. Frey, a Swiss architect making indelibly California homes in Palm Springs, is appropriated by Lulić, an Austrian artist with Serbo-Croatian origins for an artwork in touring Austria and Germany set to end up in Croatia. The museum here functions the premier non-site, soaking up the spatial references of specific architectural histories and contexts, and re-presenting them as art. In this sense, Lulić's focus on the *Frey House 1* reconstructs arguments in architecture about scale and use beyond the overweening pomp of the current crop of "destination" buildings.

Lulić's peripatetic house uses the gallery/museum as an opportunity to fund and construct a dream house later to be re-sited in the country. In this the gallery becomes a platform for aspirations to view the museum as an ideal interior, as the ideal home, though still with a collective, public function. Walter Benjamin claimed of the museum this very feature of satisfying a public thirst for better spaces. As he wrote, "Museums unquestionably belong to the dream houses of the collective,"⁸ and in this case Lulić literalizes Benjamin's imperative to see the museum and the domestic interior as inescapably interrelated. Viewers' pilgrimages to art sites in part stem from very real desires to see nice things in nice spaces beyond the horizon of private consumption. In his wish to build a homestead, the Lulić House's "Weekend Utopia" removes the artwork out of private collection and inserts it into the alternative economy of artist-run spaces. Springboarding from the existing public gallery space into a secondary site—the artwork itself as a fully-fledged home—Lulić erects a monument to the everyday demands of art production in current scenarios of the every-increasing privatization of culture.



Plakat / poster *Halbluxus / Semiuxury*, 1997

¹ Volume 5 interview with Albert Frey, n.d., www.volume5.com

² "Wilhelm Reich's Response to FDA's Complaint for Injunction," February 25, 1954, posted on www.orgone.org

³ "Talking with Tony Smith: Conversations with Samuel Wagstaff, Jr.," (1966), in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents in Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 128

⁴ Musil, "Monuments" in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2006), p. 64

⁵ Deyan Sudjic, Speech at the opening ceremony of Light+Building 2006 presentation of the Architecture+Technology Award, "Pauiskirche," Frankfurt am Main, April 23, 2006

⁶ Ernst Bloch, "Building in Empty Spaces," (1959) in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 186

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 406

Marko Lulić

**ICH WAR DIE PUTZFRAU
AM BAUHAUS**

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Impressum / Imprint

Dieser Katalog erscheint anlässlich der Ausstellungen / This catalogue is being published on the occasion of the exhibitions: **Pressspanplatten für den Frieden / Chipboards for Peace**, Kunstverein Heilbronn, 20.01.–11.03.2007, **Edifice Complex**, Oldenburger Kunstverein, Oldenburg, 23.03.–13.05.2007, und / and **Preservation of Monuments and Historic Buildings and Bodywork**, Kunstverein Arnsberg, 13.04.–10.06.2007.

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59821 Arnsberg
www.kunstverein-arnsberg.de

Übersetzungen / translations
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Gestaltung / design
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Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft mbH
Werderstr. 25
50672 Köln
Tel. 0221–5104386
www.snoeck.de

www.marcolulic.net

ISBN 978-3-936859-70-6
Printed in Germany

Der Oldenburger Kunstverein dankt für Unterstützung / Oldenburger Kunstverein thanks for the support:



österreichisches kulturforum^{österreich}



Katalog und Ausstellung kommen zustande dank der Unterstützung der / catalogue and exhibition made possible by:



Alfried Krupp von Bohlen
und Halbach-Stiftung