ARTWORK FOR BEDROOMS

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> My first space was in Bernal Heights—it was four feet high, four feet wide, and thirty feet long.
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> I was living in a closet inside a closet. It smelled like cornmeal because there was a chicken coop next to it.
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> We had a two- or three-bedroom apartment, and eight people lived there, on top of each other, like gerbils.
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> I would go to open houses and seventy-five people would be trying to get that one place.
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> I was living in a shitty warehouse and had a room made out of Sheetrock. It was dark and like a cave.
>
> I was in and out of housing. My living situation dictated the work I was making.

These quotes come from the book you are holding now, the centerpiece of which is an oral history of the Bay Area art scene between 1980 and today. They describe a generation of artists, writers, musicians, and others, who were drawn to San Francisco for its community, sexual freedom, cheap living, and spaces for self-determined culture, who were increasingly forced to live in cramped and peculiar circumstances as the city changed. Equally, they tell the story of a city—the attenuated relationship between its self-image and its real social conditions—at a moment of change and crisis. And finally, they set the stage for the fragile, poetic art made in those conditions around the turn of the century, which made its room in these tight spaces. “We were all doing poetic things back and forth to each other,” one artist tells us. “It doesn’t sound like a lot, but it was.”

This book is pendant and documentation of an eponymous exhibition held at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in 2018. In its exhibition form, *Artwork for Bedrooms* featured works by Tauba Auerbach, Sarah Cain, Ajit Chauhan, Veronica DeJesus, Colter Jacobsen, Sahar Khoury, Alicia McCarthy, and Will Rogan, all of which were made between 2000 and 2008. The oral history expands upon this cohort and timeline—though the first years of the twenty-first century remain its focal point, for reasons we will describe. Arguably, this book provides the most substantial account of this era of San Francisco's art community to date.

Though we would caution against thinking about our title in too literal a way—these works were sometimes shown in galleries or museums, not bedrooms—one will nevertheless hear a lot about sleeping situations in the pages to come. People crash on the balcony at art school, or on each other's floors; they trade nights in an apartment above a biker bar. They sleep three to a room on egg-crate foam; they sack out on porches or in pantries. They put a single bed in the closet of an artist's studio with dead animals on the walls, like the setting of a creepy fairy tale.

Reading the oral history, one discovers that the story of art in San Francisco in the early 2000s cannot easily be extricated from the politics of the city's spaces. Indeed, our title is derived from an account written by one of the participating artists. On a cold night in San Francisco, he invited his friends 'round for a "craft night with various alcohols," asking them to "bring something that you find on the street... to do something to the thing you found... and then to return the altered found thing to the street." Someone at the party set about producing artworks to decorate the living room and bedroom of a toy house: hence, *Artwork for Bedrooms.* It struck us immediately that the phrase reflected something important about the moment our show aimed to describe and about the work the artists produced. That is, many of these works were produced at home, in kitchens or in bedrooms, rather than in stand-alone studios. Some of these works were first displayed publicly in apartments, not galleries; the artists mounted shows of some ambition and profile in their rented housing.

The title therefore gestures not only to pragmatism, to working with whatever spaces were available, but also to an inbuilt ethos and a point of view. "Back then I went to artist-run spaces. It was not a 'fuck you' to galleries, but no one our age was interested in galleries," one artist tells us. Another ruminates about art's role in a market society: "What do I want out of capitalism? To be a king? I do not want a shitty job, and I do not want to be ashamed of poverty. I want art to do something else." Describing the inspiration offered by one artist to another, a third says, "Her idea was just to do it: cut your own hair, make your own clothes, make your paintings, do your shows, play your music—do it." These values, central to San Francisco's image and reputation, were what drew many to the city in the first place—another factor being its reputation as a "wild, gay city," a sanctuary for queer and trans people.

Community was paramount; everybody's lives intertwined with their art. An artist made relief sculptures from the legs and back of her partner in their apartment/studio. Artists organized exhibitions in their bedrooms, cramming furniture into one room and inviting everybody they knew. More than one artist refers to the art gallery as a bedroom, an extension of individual space—and a few describe sleeping in galleries during installation as both a necessity and a means of claiming space, of being as close as possible to the magnetic force that brings an exhibition together.

Community was paramount, yes. But the closeness of a community can cut in multiple directions. It can be a safety net, or a barrier to growth. Community can include, but it can also exclude; it can support or limit. When San Francisco embraces you, it hugs you tight, we are told. Find yourself outside that tight circle, and the feeling of isolation becomes even more extreme. "San Francisco was inclusive up to a point," an artist says. "But there was a ceiling. It got shitty when you reached it and your aspirations were bigger than it allowed." The end of the oral history addresses this question: why people leave the city, and why they stay.

As mentioned above, the works in the exhibition (which are documented in the pages to come) were produced between

2000 and 2008. These dates bracket the works included economically; that is, between two financial implosions: the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s, driven by speculation in technology, and the worldwide financial crash of 2008, driven by speculation in real estate. The former is narrated in particular depth in these pages, inasmuch as the evictions it occasioned made room for the scene *Artwork for Bedrooms* describes: "Once the venues shut down and the people moved away, there was this strange kind of space." Indeed, one implicit claim of ours is that this "strange kind of space" is sometimes rendered in the works themselves. Another claim is that the work is explicitly political—perhaps more so than one might assume from its seemingly dreamy stance. This period was characterized by the George W. Bush presidency and the Iraq War; woven through these pages are antiwar protests, anticapitalist fashion shows, and an atmosphere that felt like it could explode at any time. These events, too, we find registered in the work, whether directly or in aesthetic form.

Technology played a key role in these years, instantly relegating to obsolescence, at least on relative terms, whole mediums and means of expression. Digital photography replaced analogue, and digital storage replaced photographic prints; this transition is one reason that the art, exhibitions, and performances of this time have been inconsistently documented or lost to the perils of archaic media storage. Moreover, forms of being together were changing; social media like Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, and so on, had begun to loosen old bonds and institute new ones. Communication was becoming more truncated as email and text messages began to dominate personal interaction. "There's not the pause for reflection there used to be," one artist tells us. Another writes that his "drawings were a response to this weird distancing in communication. I felt a need or desire to look at old ways people used to connect, like in the personal ads in gay magazines." Skeptical of this new separation, these artists privileged interacting face to face.

As we were assembling both exhibition and book, furthermore, we were aware that this period was one in which a

certain story of San Francisco art had been written—one that remains now, fifteen years later, a dominant narrative of this moment. Namely, we mean the Mission School, a group of artists, some of whom attended the San Francisco Art Institute, who were famed for colorful assemblages of found material, a groovy graphic sensibility, and immersive installations that drew on the aesthetic of the city's streets. *Artwork for Bedrooms* tells a parallel but somewhat later story, one that was affected in positive and negative ways by the Mission School narrative as it took shape—as a contingent description became a historiographic fact, sorting out those who fit from those who did not.

One artist, for example, describes loitering outside a gallery on Market Street hoping to see the "super cool specters" of the Mission School walk past (they eventually obliged); some describe the formative influence of artists connected to this term. Others, though, have mixed feelings, pointing to a sudden flood of Mission School copyist work, growing anxiety that institutional recognition might compromise a commitment to the margins, or that cherry-picking artists for shows risked distorting or destroying what was rightfully a community aesthetic. "The initial success may have hindered the art," one artist avers; once people started getting "chosen" for museum shows, the vital fiction of equality was compromised, and "a strangeness entered the community."

It would be fair to say that another implicit premise of the exhibition is that the Mission School is just one among many possible narratives of this moment—to argue that other stories about the art of this time can be told, and to present one such story. The premise of the oral history is more ambitious. It aims to rearrange our thinking about the art made in these years, in terms of its conditions of visibility, its use of particular historically defined ideas, and its imbrication in a complex sociohistorical juncture. Put more simply, we hoped to produce a history that was more inclusive than the dominant narrative had so far allowed, and one that better grasped the queer, punk, and multicultural aspects of the scene.

Maybe it is only now that we can begin to look back at that period with fresh eyes—or maybe it took a group of graduate students from Brazil, China, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the United States to give a new perspective. San Francisco has often benefited from the perspective of such enthusiastic outsiders, who represent the city back to longtime residents in starry terms. "I don't understand why everyone in America doesn't just move to San Francisco," says one such ardent visitor. "You've got everything in one city. You've got a downtown and you've got the beach. You've got the mountains. You've got '60s San Francisco. It's so colorful and so varied. I know since I left everyone's complaining about the tech people moving in and prices going up and blah, blah, blah. But San Francisco is old and beautiful. You can still hide away as a person in San Francisco." Aspects of this artists' tribute still ring true, still seduce. Another artist, more circumspect, acknowledges that San Francisco is "a comfortable, nostalgic, beautiful city." For her, though, it is "in a bubble." We take her to mean that the city imagines itself to be separate from or not fully part of the world; whether this separateness and self-relation feels protective or suffocating, dreamy or deluded, depends on one's point of view.

By way of conclusion, let's return to the bedroom. What does it mean to consider the history of a place from the perspective of the bedroom? What might doing so reveal? Bedrooms are intimate, private, and messy. They are places of love and hate, care and carelessness, rest and restlessness, safety and abuse, reproduction and experimentation. They are where we discover ourselves and forget ourselves. In short, they're complicated. As one artist relates, "The bedroom for me is about privacy and secrecy, an internal quality. And then so many things come out of this." "I thought my bedroom was a good venue for these drawings," says another: "a private place made public for one night."

Exhibition