Housebound: Selfhood and Domestic Space in Narratives by Judith Hermann and Susanne Fischer

This article examines the depiction and role of domestic space and houses in the short stories “Zuhälter” (2003) and “Sommerhaus, später” (1998) by Judith Hermann and the novel Die Platzanweiserin (2006) by Susanne Fischer. It argues that the focus on home and houses grates against the characters’ urban mobility and mindset and that these texts attempt to invert the dichotomy of private and public space by endowing the city with “homely” features and portraying the home as alienating. Moreover, the quest for shelter and selfhood is also associated with the dilapidated, ugly or haunted house. By appropriating the haunted house motif, these narratives rework Romantic and Gothic traditions that reveal the women characters’ deep-seated lack of selfhood that relates to contemporary patterns of commitment and autonomy.

Houses are powerful objects that impact and shape an impressive range of personal and public interests. Providing for our most basic needs, offering both shelter and identity, and representing specific historical formations, houses virtually touch upon all aspects of individual needs and collective organization. As an intensely emotional experience, a major financial investment and a material reality embedded in architectural, aesthetic, and social traditions, the house, in the words of two critics “simply is society, is history, is life itself in all its contradictions and confusions”.1 To understand these contradictions and confusions, they argue, one must analyze domestic space “for it is here […] that the human subject is constantly constructed and deconstructed” (Smyth and Croft, 25).

Despite this almost primordial quality of house and housing, German Cultural Studies has not paid too much attention to the study of domestic space. Its current focus on issues of migration and memory privileges more overtly political, historical, and urban topics, such as Berlin’s shifting metropolitan landscape, reconfigurations of national past and identity or multiculturalism.2

Yet each instance of migration or displacement corresponds to a prior place-
ment, however fraught or tentative, and studying this placement can comple-
ment our understanding of movements across time and place. Also memories
of the past, of loss hinge on the placement of people or objects, often located in
the house of childhood. Overlooking the house, a crucial point of origin and
orientation, thus risks ignoring how personal space represents and constructs
selfhood and how it interacts with gendered, cultural or national identity. Like
its counterpart urban space, domestic space can, in a different key, powerfully
register changing conditions of contemporary existence.

Domestic space is, of course, intimate and deeply gendered space, and it is
closely linked to the history of the bourgeois family. One could thus assume
that contemporary women authors such as Judith Hermann, Karen Duve, Zoë
Jenny or Susanne Fischer known for featuring cool characters, i.e. women pro-
tagonists who want no truck with the domestic middle class life of their parents
and its entanglements in routine and responsibility, keep far away from the
house. Surprisingly, however, houses are given a significant role in their work.
The novels *Regenroman* (1999) by Karen Duve and *Die Platzanweiserin*
(2006) by Susanne Fischer elevate houses almost to the status of protagonists,
Jenny and Hermann feature houses and rooms already in the titles of their texts
(*Blütenstaubzimmer*, 1997, *Sommerhaus, später*, 1998) and a wave of family
and (auto)biographical narratives of recent years are equally invested in hous-
ing issues. How then to explain this persistent interest in rooms, apartments
and houses that goes well beyond the pragmatics that fictional characters, too,
need a place to live? Specifically, how do women writers appropriate houses
and domestic space and how are these connected to gendered selfhood at the
beginning of the twenty-first century?

To answer some of these questions, I would like to take readers on a brief
house tour and show a few dwellings that allow us to gain insight into some cur-
rent cultural, social, and literary trends. There are many houses to choose from in
the literary real estate market, but the most intriguing ones are the odd homes that
defy standards of comfort and beauty. These are the ugly or decrepit places, the
run-down house in the countryside, the bleak apartment or the shabby postwar
row house evoking the uncanny and the haunted house of the gothic. Such places
appear prominently in Hermann’s two short-story collections (*Sommerhaus,*

3 See Erica L. Johnson’s comparative study, *Home, Maison, Casa*. Madison: Fairleigh
Dickinson University Press 2003. Johnson emphasizes the complimentary relation-

4 Examples include Arno Geiger: *Es geht uns gut*. Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher
Taschenbuch Verlag 2007; Zafer Şenocak: *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft*. Bonn: Babel