

Jan McCullough: Home Instruction Manual

Aris Kourkoumelis

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- EXHIBITION

In her latest project **Jan McCullough** uses photography to explore the fluid and constructed nature of what constitutes the ideal house. Driven by her discovery of an online discussion on the perfection of domestic spaces, McCullough moved her studio into a rented empty house, where she put into practice the tips offered by various anonymous users. She then photographed her resulting compositions, creating images that demonstrate, among others, the functional way to store Tupperware, the wheelie bin's acceptable location, and the right arrangement of postcards on the kitchen's cork board. In fact, McCullough went to great lengths to find the props and furniture appropriate to the instructions she was following. This included tasks such as visiting thrift shops, browsing eBay's listings and borrowing a cat from a friend.



Jan McCullough, 'Tupperware 4', from the series *Home Instruction Manual*, 2014, courtesy the artist

Born and raised in Northern Ireland, McCullough embarked on developing *Home Instruction Manual* in 2014, a year after her graduation from the Belfast School of Art. The project was originally pitched as a **photobook**. The forum's conversation and McCullough's images were printed on inexpensive paper and casually inserted as two separate supplements. The book's design put the artist firmly to the path towards her 2015 **Fotobookfestival Kassel Dummy Award** victory. Wisely, for her new London show at **Seen Fifteen** McCullough kept the manual's ephemeral aesthetic, pinning prints directly onto the wall and hanging texts as rolls from the ceiling.



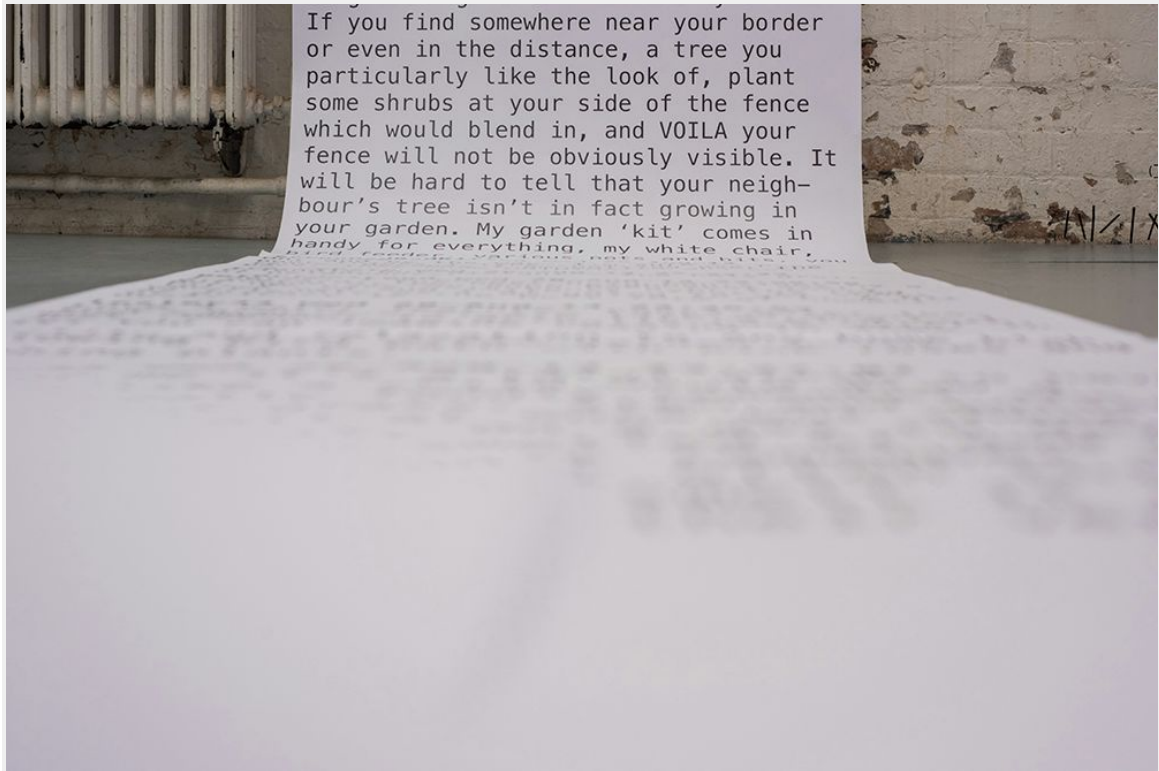
Jan McCullough, *Home Instruction Manual*, installation view, 2016, courtesy Seen Fifteen Gallery
Be it in print or book form, McCullough's photographs of the perfect home are very different from what one would naturally

expect, namely desirable and cosy environments. Instead, her otherwise adroitly composed images elicit a strange atmosphere of detachment, which echoes the banality of William Eggleston's interiors and the aesthetic of Wolfgang Tillmans' snapshots.



Jan McCullough, *Home Instruction Manual*, installation view, 2016, courtesy Seen Fifteen Gallery

Yet the mode within which McCullough operates may be reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's performative practice, particularly her *Society Portraits*. While Sherman acted out her observations of American youth-obsessed women, McCullough brought to life her collection of online views on the perfect home. As with Sherman's series, McCullough's manual is mischievous and intelligent at the same time: a playful project that skilfully borrows the tools of a production designer, but also, perhaps, a comment on the unattainable goal of perfection.



Jan McCullough, *Home Instruction Manual*, installation view, 2016, courtesy Seen Fifteen Gallery

Yet to simply identify McCullough's work as a critique on the hypocrisy and superficiality of consumer society is to overlook her intention to emphasise the subjectivity of taste and the multiplicity of perspectives. Although both distillation and inventiveness play a key role in her work, McCullough's voice has no authorial intent. For instance, she once realised that users hold conflicting views on the ideal number and colour of bed cushions. Rather than selecting the most extravagant or absurd option, she staged and photographed all ideas independently, presenting them in a grid on the gallery wall.



Jan McCullough, 'Plant 1', from the series *Home Instruction Manual*, 2014, courtesy the artist

The fact that a typed discussion forms the project's departure point is not the only reason this article features on the **Photocaptionist**, which explores image-text intersections. McCullough's denial of the existence of a single reality bears a striking similarity to a type of literature the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin famously identified in Dostoevsky's work. 'Dialogism' is constructed in a novel by a diverse range of characters that have different, at times contradictory, perspectives, all equally important for the interpretation of the work. Unlike 'monologism', in which characters exist only to serve the author's intention, 'dialogism' does not subordinate multiple voices to that of the author. Similarly, McCullough does not merge multiple users' ideas into a single image to present her own notion of the perfect home, but rather, how the perfect home appears to each user.



Jan McCullough, *Home Instruction Manual*, book dummy, courtesy Photolreland

It will come as no surprise that Verlag Kettler has decided to publish McCullough's compelling manual, which, by rendering

actual a virtual world of desired interiors, challenges the very notion of the ideal home.

Aris Kourkoumelis is a photo historian, currently working as coordinator of the **Norman Parkinson Archive**. He has previously worked in the photographic departments of Phillips, the Vatican Library, and the Benaki museum in Athens.