

THE CURATORIAL TURN: FROM PRACTICE TO DISCOURSE

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Introductory context:

It was in the late 1960s that Seth Siegelaub used the term 'demystification' in order to establish the shift in exhibition production conditions, whereby curators were beginning to make visible the mediating component within the formation, production and dissemination of an exhibition.

I think in our generation we thought that we could demystify the role of the museum, the role of the collector, and the production of the artwork; for example, how the size of a gallery affects the production of art, etc. In that sense we tried to demystify the hidden structures of the art world. (O'Neill, P. and Siegelaub 2006)

During the 1960s the primary discourse around art-in-exhibition began to turn away from forms of critique of the artwork as autonomous object of study/critique towards a form of curatorial criticism, in which the space of exhibition was given critical precedence over that of the objects of art. Curatorial criticism differed from that of traditional western art criticism (i.e. linked to modernity) in that its discourse and subject matter went beyond discussion about artists and the object of art to include the subject of curating and the role played by the curator of exhibitions. The ascendancy of the curatorial gesture in the 1990s also began to establish curating as a potential nexus for discussion, critique and debate, where the evacuated role of the critic in parallel cultural discourse was usurped by the neo-critical space of curating. During this period, curators and artists have reacted to and engaged with this 'neo-criticality' by extending the parameters of the exhibition form to incorporate more discursive, conversational and geo-political discussion, centred within the ambit of the exhibition. The ascendancy of

this 'curatorial gesture' in the 1990s (as well as the professionalization of contemporary curating) began to establish curatorial practice as a potential space for critique. Now the neo-critical curator has usurped the evacuated place of the critic. As Liam Gillick pointed out:

My involvement in the critical space is a legacy of what happened when a semi-autonomous critical voice started to become weak, and one of the reasons that happened was that curating became a dynamic process. So people you might have met before, who in the past were critics were now curators. The brightest, smartest people get involved in this multiple activity of being mediator, producer, interface and neo-critic. It is arguable that the most important essays about art over the last ten years have not been in art magazines but they have been in catalogues and other material produced around galleries, art centres and exhibitions. (Gillick 2005: 74)

Accompanying this 'turn towards curating' was the emergence of curatorial anthologies. Beginning in the 1990s, most of these tended to come out of international meetings between curators, as part of curatorial summits, symposia, seminars and conferences, although some of them may have taken local curatorial practice as their starting point. Without exception, they placed an emphasis on individual practice, the first-person narrative and curator self-positioning – articulated through primary interviews, statements and exhibition representations – as they attempted to define and map out a relatively bare field of discourse.

Alongside this predominantly curator-led discourse, curatorial criticism responded with an assertion of the separateness of the artistic and curatorial gesture – when such divisions are no longer apparent in contemporary exhibition practice. I would argue that such a divisive attempt to detach the activity of curating from that of artistic production results in resistance to recognition of the interdependence of both practices within the field of cultural production. Moreover the mediation of hybrid cultural agents through the means of the public exhibition is overlooked.

The curatorial turn

'Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known.'
(Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne 1996: 2)

Exhibitions (in whatever form they take) are always ideological; as hierarchical structures they produce particular and general forms of communication. Since the late 1980s, the group exhibition has become the primary site for curatorial experimentation and, as such, has generated a new discursive space around artistic practice. The group exhibition runs counter to the canonical model of the monographic presentation. By bringing a greater mix of people into an exhibition, it also created a space for defining multifarious ways of engaging with disparate interests, often within a more trans-cultural context. Group exhibitions are ideological texts which make private intentions public. In

particular, it is the temporary art exhibition that has become the principal medium in the distribution and reception of art; thus, being the principal agent in debate and criticism about any aspect of the visual arts.

Exhibitions (particularly group exhibitions, art fairs, temporary-perennial shows and large-scale international art exhibitions) are the main means through which contemporary art is now mediated, experienced and historicized. Just as the number of large-scale, international exhibitions increased since the 1990s, so has the respectability of the phenomenon of curating been enhanced. Similarly, writing about exhibitions has further reinforced the merit of curatorial practice as a subject worthy of study. As a tactic: 'This may either be a compensatory device, a politicized attempt to consider works of art as interrelated rather than as individual entities, or a textual response to changes in the art world itself' (Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne 1996).

The critical debate surrounding curatorial practice has not only intensified, but as Alex Farquharson has pointed out, even the recent appearance of the verb 'to curate', where once there was just a noun, indicates the growth and vitality of this discussion. He writes: 'new words, after all, especially ones as grammatically bastardised as the verb "to curate" (worse still the adjective "curatorial"), emerge from a linguistic community's persistent need to identify a point of discussion.' (Farquharson 2003)

Indicative of a shift in the primary role of curator is the changing perception of the curator as carer to a curator who has a more creative and active part to play within the production of art itself. This new verb, 'to curate...may also suggest a shift in the conception of what curators do, from a person who works at some remove from the processes of artistic production, to one actively "in the thick of it".' (Farquharson 2003) Ten years previously, when writing about cultural production, Pierre Bourdieu noted that the curator (*inter alia*) added cultural meaning and value to the making of art and artists:

The subject of the production of the artwork – of its value but also of its meaning – is not the producer who actually creates the object in its materiality, but rather the entire set of agents engaged in the field. Among these are the producers of works, classified as artists...critics of all persuasions...collectors, middlemen, curators, etc.; in short, all those who have ties with art, who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a vision of the art world is at stake, and who, through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art. (Bourdieu 1993: 261)

As cultural agents, curators and artists participate in the production of cultural value, exhibitions are intrinsic and vital parts of what Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer termed the 'cultural industries' associated with: entertainment; mass culture; the communications enterprise of mass reception; and as part of the consciousness industry (see Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 120–167). Exhibitions are, therefore,

contemporary forms of rhetoric, complex expressions of persuasion, whose strategies aim to produce a prescribed set of values and social relations for their audiences. As such exhibitions are subjective political tools, as well as being modern ritual settings, which uphold identities (artistic, national, sub-cultural, 'international', gender-or-race-specific, avant-garde, regional, global etc.); they are to be understood as institutional 'utterances' within a larger culture industry. (See Ferguson 1996: 178–9.)

Biennial culture and the culture of curation

One of the most evident developments in contemporary curatorial practice since the late 1980s has been occurring on an increasingly inter-national, trans-national and multi-national scale, where the 'local' and the 'global' are in constant dialogue. In *Contemporary* magazine's special issue on curating, published in 2005, Isabel Stevens produced a substantive list of 80 official Biennials/ Triennials throughout the globe to be held between 2006 and 2008. Terms such as 'biennial', 'biennale', or 'mega-exhibitions' no longer refer to those few exhibitions that occur perennially, every two years or so: they are now all encompassing idioms for large-scale international group exhibitions, which, for each local cultural context,, are organized locally with connection to other national cultural networks (Stevens 2005). Biennials are temporary spaces of mediation, usually allocated to invited curators with support from a local socio-cultural network. They are interfaces between art and larger publics – publics which are at once local and global, resident and nomadic, non-specialist and art-worldly.

In what Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic call the 'biennial phenomenon' such 'large-scale international exhibitions' reflect the cultural diversity of global artistic practices and call into question the inertia of public art institutions that are unwilling or too slow to respond to such praxis (Filipovic & Vanderlinden 2005). Biennials have become a form of institution in themselves; their frequency has resulted in an index of comparability. In a rather prophetic essay, written in the early 1990s, Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne had already begun to question the fundamental idea of international survey exhibitions. Their collective essay ended with the paragraph:

However progressive the political or economic intentions behind them, international exhibitions still invite a presumption that the curators have access to an illusionary world view, and that spectators may follow in their wake. But a more specific and sustained engagement with communities and audiences, creating meanings beyond the spectacular and mere festivalising of such occasions, may produce a new genre of exhibition. It seems that in order to accommodate both artist's needs and audience demands, the new exhibition must have reciprocity and dialogue built into its structure. How successfully this is accomplished will determine international exhibition maps of the future. (Ferguson, Greenberg & Nairne 2005: 3)

As was predicted, these event-exhibitions have shaped new social, cultural and political relations in a more globalized world, where the traditional biennial model is maintained through discourse on cultural policy, national representation and internationalism, thereby enabling cultural travel, urban renovation and local tourism. Alternately, it is arguable that they have become polarizing spaces to legitimize certain forms of artistic and curatorial praxis within the global culture industry.

Very few *biennials* are of the scale of *Documenta*, *Johannesburg*, *Venice* or even *Istanbul*. Many tend to be improvisatory, localized and modest in their aims. Here I am interested in the general-specific homogeneity produced by the institution of the biennial, not the heterogeneity of the myriad of localized cultural statements. The populist perception of the activity of curating has changed in large part due to the spread of biennials in the 1990s, whereby new degrees of visibility and responsibility were placed upon the curator. Apart from the particular issues of scale, temporality and location, the activity of curation made manifest through such exhibitions is articulated as being identity-driven; therefore, an overtly politicized, discursively global and fundamentally auteured praxis prevails, in spite of the many variable forms they have taken on. The biennial form as a global exhibition model has driven much of the art world's global extension since 1989, when *Les Magiciens de la Terre* began the process. Biennials have become the vehicle through which much art is validated and acquires value on the international art circuit. Now such 'global exhibitions' often have as their main theme, 'globalization', whilst questioning the ideological underpinning of the exhibition itself as a product of that process.

Despite any curatorial self-reflexivity in recent large-scale exhibitions that may exist towards the global effects of 'biennialization', the periphery still has to follow the discourse of the centre. In the case of biennials, the periphery comes to the centre in search of legitimization and, by default, accepts the conditions of this legitimacy. Charles Esche suggests that the globalization of art within large-scale exhibitions has, through a process of standardization, absorbed the difference between centre and periphery. According to Esche, the 'centre first' model of global art, largely begun in 1989, still holds sway over much of the museum and biennial culture. It requires 'the key institutions of contemporary culture officially to sanction the "periphery" in order to subsume it into the canon of innovative visual art.' (Esche 2005: 105). Even though many of the artists in each exhibition may have developed their practice on the fringes of the recognized art world, 'their energy is validated and consumed by the centre and therefore the relationship between rim and hub remains in place. This is, of course, how globalisation generally operates – sometimes to the economic benefit of the patronised but rarely in the interests of maintaining their autonomy and sustainability.' (Esche 2005: 105).

The exhibition's ritual of maintaining a given set of power relations between art, display and reception is particularly true of, what John Miller called, the 'blockbuster exhibition', which tends to incorporate anachronistic elements whilst recuperating any

dissent from viewers as part of the totality of the overall event. In consequence, a 'cycle of raised expectations and quick disillusionment' is both predictable and over-determined. Miller argues that the 'mega-exhibition' is an ideological institution that reifies social relations between artworks and spectator. As the explicit purpose of these shows is to offer a comprehensive survey of artworks on a demographic basis, the terms of discourse are treated as pre-determined, rather than being 'transformed in the course of art production and therefore subject to contradiction and conflict.' (Miller 1996: 270)

According to Miller, a critique of these exhibitions on the basis of curatorial choices made within the established framework would be to ignore the ideologies underpinning the institutions that are responsible for them. He suggests that such institutions often treat and address audiences as a concrete social constituency, whereby artworks are relegated to mere 'raw material' within the 'total artwork' of the exhibition (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), thus privileging the curator's subjectivity, so that the outcome of the exhibition-form is naturalized as an organic inevitability within the organization's institutional framework producing an illusion of curatorial inspiration and genius (Miller 1996a: 272).

I would argue that during a period of transformation since 1989 the notion of exhibitions as authored subjectivities produced dominant discourses around 'mega-exhibitions'. Although more recent biennials have moved away from the single-author position towards more collective models, a globally configured exhibition market has persisted with a curator-centred discourse. Discussions, lecture programmes, conferences, publications and discursive events are also now a re-current and integral part of such exhibitions, or in the case of some exhibitions, such as *Documenta X* and especially *Documenta 11*, discursive events formed the very foundation of the project. As Elena Filipovic suggested:

This striking expansion goes in tandem with curatorial discourses that increasingly distinguish the biennial or mega exhibition as larger than the mere presentation of artworks; they are understood as vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate. (Filipovic 2006: 66)

In many ways the expanding network of biennials has effectively embraced art and artists from the peripheries beyond a dominantly Western European and American internationalism, but as Jessica Bradley argued, they function as a more responsive and spectacular means of distribution:

[O]ne that can efficiently meet the accelerated rate of exchange and consumption parallel to the global flow of capital and information today...while curatorial aspirations are frequently concerned with addressing cultures in flux and eschew cultural nationalism, the motives for establishing these events may nevertheless reside in a desire to promote and validate local, culturally specific production within a global network. (Bradley 2003: 89)

It is the inter-relational attributes of both culture and location that are the most obviously marketable aspects of global tourism upon which they depend. Locality embodied in the promotion of tourist spots, local specialities, sites, culture and produce are actually the most reliable economic revenues for local communities. It has also been argued that during these times of 'culture as spectacle', artistic production is a catalyst for culture to be globalized, attracting financial investments as well as audiences. Ivo Mesquita also argues that during these times of 'culture as spectacle', artistic production acts as a catalyst for globalized culture, attracting financial investments and audiences. Biennials (and art fairs) are happening in more and more cities, which have adopted cultural tourism as a means of securing a place in the international arena of economy and culture, wherein artists, curators, critics, art dealers, patrons and sponsors nurture a clearly defined production system, through labour division, which produces hierarchical roles for the participants (Mesquita 2003: 63–68).

As an important agent within the global cultural industry, a new kind of international curator was identified by Ralph Rugoff as a 'jet-set *flâneur*' who appears to know no geographical boundaries, and for whom a type of global-internationalism is the central issue (Rugoff 1999). In particular, the role of the nomadic curator within large-scale exhibitions is to select and display "international" art through a visible framing device: a subjective (curatorial) system of mediation that has the notion of inclusivity as one of its central thematics. The rise of the global curator has less to do with embedded power structures within the art world and more to do with inherited cultural significance (and capital), where practice has long been prioritized over discourse within the culture industry as a whole, where practice is in turn dependent on being translated back into discourse in order to facilitate more equivalent practice, which enables the maintenance of the existing superstructure. As Benjamin Buchloh identified in 1989, there is an urgent need for articulating the curatorial position as part of art discourse, where practice as 'doing' or 'curating' necessitated a discourse as 'speaking' or 'writing', in order for the curator's function to be acknowledged as part of the institutional superstructure at the level of discourse:

The curator observes his/ her operation within the institutional apparatus of art: most prominently the procedure of abstraction and centralisation that seems to be an inescapable consequence of the work's entry into the superstructure apparatus, its transformation from practice to discourse. That almost seems to have become the curator's primary role: to function as an agent who offers exposure and potential prominence – in exchange for obtaining a moment of actual practice that is about to be transformed into myth/ superstructure. (Buchloh 1989)

This interest in discourse, as a supplement or substitute for practice, was highlighted in Dave Beech and Gavin Wade's speculative introduction to *Curating in the 21st Century*, 2000, in which they stated that 'even talking is doing something, especially if you are saying something worthwhile. Doing and saying, then are forms of acting on the world.' (Wade & Beech 2000: 9–10). So, it seems fair to characterize the discursive as an

ambivalent way of saying something *vis-à-vis* doing. This may seem a somewhat optimistic speculation, as Mick Wilson argues in his assessment of the productive powers of language, which have been part of the stock assumptions of a wide range of experimental art practices and attendant commentary (Wilson 2007). This tendency has been given further impetus by what he calls 'the Foucauldian moment in art of the last two decades, and the ubiquitous appeal of the term "discourse" as a word to conjure and perform power', to the point where 'even talking is doing something', with the value of the discursive as something located in its proxy for actual doing within discourses on curatorial practice (Wilson 2007: 202).

The 'rise of the curator as creator', as Bruce Altshuler (1994) labeled it, has also gathered momentum. The ever-increasing number of global biennials has provided what Julia Bryan-Wilson claims to be prestigious 'launching pads for the curatorial star system' in 'the age of curatorial studies', in which the 'institutional basis of art is taken as a given, and the marketing and packaging of contemporary art has become a specialized focus of inquiry for thousands of students.' (Bryan-Wilson 2003: 102–3). If the 1990s were all about a new professionalization during a period of globalization, they now seem to represent acceleration in the global art exhibition-making market followed by a settling down period. Only now can we begin to evaluate the processes of translation that accompanied these productions and recognize that curating as distinct moments of practice is significantly divergent from curatorial discourse.

Beatrice von Bismarck provided an example of this bifurcation between curatorial practice and discourse, so that professionalization and differentiation within the art world have turned curating into a hierarchically arranged job description, whereby "internationally networked service providers" offer their skills to a diverse exhibition market, when curating as practice is understood in discourse as something that is distinct from its understanding as a job title:

Of the tasks originally associated with the fixed institutional post, curating takes only that of presentation. With the aim of creating an audience for artistic and cultural materials and techniques, of making them visible, the exhibition becomes the key presentation medium. In contrast to the curator's other duties, curating itself frees the curator from the invisibility of the job, giving him/her an otherwise uncommon degree of freedom [...] and a prestige not unlike that enjoyed by artists. (von Bismarck 2004: 99)

Within curatorial discourse, the figure of the curator operates at a level previously understood as being the domain of artistic practice, where in Foucauldian terms, such discourse is 'the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements...' (Foucault 2003: 30). Thus, curating-specific discourse engenders a requisite level of prestige, necessitated by the dynamics of contemporary curating. Practice alone does not produce and support such esteem, rather distinct

moments of practice translate into a hierarchical 'common discourse' of curating as it is understood through its discursive formations. While internationalism is now at the core of practice with the biennial industry, its accompanying curatorial discourse functions to maintain the superstructure of the art world on a much wider scale than ever before. Where the biennial curator is a well-travelled subject, the curators of exhibitions are already engaging in a complex network of global knowledge circuits that traverse and overlap the other: each 'biennial' is 'in conversation' with the next, providing yet another momentary place of exchange of curatorial discourse across exhibitions; each exhibition speaks with one another as well as to the world they claim to reflect.

Curator as meta/artist, artist as meta/curator

Since the late 1980s, the shift away from curating as an administrative, caring, mediating activity towards that of curating as a creative activity more akin to a form of artistic practice was indicated by Jonathan Watkins' polemic on curating written for *Art Monthly* in 1987. Using Oscar Wilde's idea that objects were transformed into art by the critic through writing, Watkins provocatively argued that curating was a form of artistic practice and that curated exhibitions were likened to Marcel Duchamp's 'Readymade Aided' artworks, where the display or exhibition is aided by the curator's 'manipulation of the environment, the lighting, the labels, the placement of other works of art.' (Watkins 1987: 27)

Watkins' loose description of what role curators/artists/critics take on within an exhibition context may no longer be completely in synchrony with the development (over the last eighteen years) of curatorial practice beyond the parameters of gallery or museum exhibition displays. Yet Watkins' belief that curating is a 'necessary, if insufficient, medium through which the communication between art and its audience takes place' (Watkins 1987) seems in tune with the way in which the cross-fading of individual positions within our cultural economy has aided the transformation of artistic practice. Its slight shift away from an author-centred cultural hierarchy towards a post-productive discourse, in which the function of curating has become another recognized part of the expanded field of art production.

Almost twenty years after Watkins' polemic, the issues inherent to the "curator as artist" question remains one of the key debates within curatorial discourse: it is still being discussed within many contemporary art magazines such as *frieze* and *Art Monthly*. In 2005, writing for his monthly column in *frieze*, curator Robert Storr expresses his fears about the notion of the curator as an artist by refusing to call curating a medium since it 'automatically conceded the point to those who will elevate curators to the status critics have achieved through the "auteurization" process.' Storr also situates the origins of the idea of the curator as artist in Oscar Wilde's 1890 essay 'The Critic as Artist' (where it is the eye of the beholder that produces the work of art) rather than in Barthes' post-structuralist analysis of authorship. Storr's conclusive response, 'No I do not think that curators are artists. And if they insist, then they will ultimately be judged bad

curators as well as bad artists' ends up reiterating 'the artist/ curator divide and inadvertently returns the power of judgement to the critic.' (Storr 2005: 27).

Storr's rejection of the notion of curating as a form of artistic practice and his refusal to call curating a medium represents one of the ongoing tensions within critical debate surrounding curatorial discourse since the late 1980s. Yet, as John Miller has argued, the spectre of the curator as meta-artist began to haunt large-scale international exhibitions since Jan Höet's *Documenta 9* in 1991, when Höet put himself forward as a curatorial artist who used a diverse range of artworks as his raw material. For Miller, the momentum of artist-curator, or the artist as meta-curator, had already been building up from the work of artists linked to institutional critique, who had taken curatorial prerogatives and the works of other artists into their own practice, such as Group Material, Julie Ault, Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson, Judith Barry and others working in the US in the 1980s. Miller argues, however, that Höet's technique of 'confrontational hanging' was less about the exposure of 'non-reflexive assumptions about what makes up an exhibition and what that might mean' (Miller 2004b: 59) associated with these artist's curatorial interventions and more about 'the wilfully arbitrary juxtaposition of works, equates artistry with free exercise of subjectivity.' (Miller 2004b: 59).

The idea of the curator as some type of meta-artist became prominent in the 1990s, where, according to Sigrid Schade, 'curators [now] sell their curatorial concepts as the artistic product and sell themselves as the artists, so the curators "swallow up" the works of the artists, as it were. In such cases, the curators claim for themselves the status of genius traditional in art history.' (Schade 1999: 11) Dorothee Richter echoed this view when she stated:

Since the eighties, we can see another shift in the roles ascribed to artists and curators: It seems perhaps as if a shift in power in favour of the curator has taken place, especially since the role of the curator increasingly allows for more opportunity for creative activity. Thus, the curator seems to employ the artistic exhibits in part as the sign of one text, namely, his or her text. (Richter 1999: 16)

Richter suggests that the presentation of an exhibition is now a form of curatorial self-presentation, a courting of a gaze where an exhibition's meaning is derived from the relationship among artistic positions. This, she argues, is represented by the co-dependent idea that the curator and artist now closely imitate each other's position (Richter, 1999: 16).

In 1972, the artist Daniel Buren wrote 'Exhibition of an Exhibition', where he claimed that: 'More and more, the subject of an exhibition tends not to be the display of artworks, but the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art.' (See Buren 2004: 26.) At the time, Buren was referring both specifically to the work of curator Harald Szeemann and his curation of *Documenta 5*, and to the emergence of the idea of exhibition organizer as author. Buren was suggesting that works were mere fragments

that make up one composite exhibition, and, although having not changed his position, he later updated his initial thoughts in 2004:

...[art works are] particular details in the service of the work in question, the exhibition of our organiser-author. At the same time – and this is where the problem has become pointed enough to create the crisis in which we find ourselves – the ‘fragments’ and other ‘details’ exhibited are, by definition and in most cases, completely and entirely foreign to the principal work in which they are participating, that is, the exhibition in question. (Buren 2004: 26)

Buren’s disdain for the tendency towards large-scale exhibitions to acquire the status of quasi-artwork where the work of the curator transforms the work of the artist into a useful ‘fragment’ in his or her own work of exhibition as art still prevails. Buren claimed that this can and has taken on many guises in the more recent past:

The organisers/ authors/ artists of large-scale exhibitions provide results we already know: Documenta transformed into a circus (Jan Höet) or even as a platform for the promotion of curators who profit from the occasion in order to publish their own thesis in the form of a catalogue essay (Catherine David) or as a tribune in favour of the developing politically-correct world (Okwui Enwezor) or other exhibitions by organiser-authors trying to provide new merchandise to the ever voracious Western market for art consumption, which, like all markets, must ceaselessly and rapidly renew itself in order not to succumb [...] (Buren 2004: 26).

But the great irony of Buren’s statement is that it is a published response to the question as to whether the *Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist* (2003) proposed by curator Jens Hoffmann as a part of his own curatorial project/exhibition/publication. By enabling Buren’s text and other artists, Hoffman’s intention was to pass to artists the critical and curatorial voice and to include them in the discussion around the effectiveness of an artist-led curatorial model, but Mark Peterson states, ‘...[it] ultimately uses a similar curatorial strategy as the one he is criticising, namely to invite artists to illustrate his thesis.’ (Peterson 2004: 80) Peterson goes on to argue that Hoffmann’s position only appears as one of self-reflexivity, as the curator attempts to involve artists in questioning, not only his own practice, but the various mechanisms and dynamics of his medium and his profession and how exhibitions gain form, yet ends up deflecting attention away from his own curatorial trap. This may in part be true, but Peterson’s position, not unfamiliar as a general viewpoint, again places the curator and artist in opposition to one another.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, it is precisely because of an absence of a single, universally accepted authority within contemporary culture that curators are becoming ‘scapegoats [...] because the curator is on the front line of a big battle for meaning under conditions of uncertainty.’ Bauman adds the term ‘scapegoat’ to a long list of ingredients for a curator’s role which he lists as animator, pusher, inspirer, brother,

community maker and someone who makes people work and things happen and someone who inspires artists with ideas, programmes and projects. He also adds that 'there would be an element of interpreting, of making sense of people, of making them understand, giving them some sort of alphabet for reading what they see, but cannot quite decide about.' (Bauman 1998: 31)

From the late 1980s, – a period of crisis – according to Bauman, who perceives art as being re-centered around what he calls 'the event of the exhibition' where the experience of art is generated primarily by short-lived temporal events and only secondly, if at all, by the ex-temporal value of the work of art itself. It is mostly the work of art exhibited in a widely publicized event that meets the standards set for the proper object of consumption, that stand the chance of maximizing the shock while avoiding the risk of boredom, which would strip it of its 'entertainment value'.

As well as their temporal and transient nature, large-scale international group exhibitions have tended to lend themselves towards thematic shows. It has been argued that such projects prevent artists from realizing their 'true potential' and even that this emphasis on the curatorial project has quite serious implications for the status and roles of art and artists. For example, Alex Farquharson questions exhibitions that foreground their own sign-structure, which pose the risk of using art and artists as constituent fibres or pieces of syntax subsumed by the identity of the whole curatorial endeavour. He argued that we are more likely to remember who curated *Utopia Station*, ongoing since 2003, than which artists took part, forgetting that Rirkrit Tiravanija (an artist) was one of the curators. For Farquharson, projects such as Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Do It* (1993 onwards, www.e-flux.com) and *Take me (I'm yours)* (Serpentine Gallery, London, 1995) or *A Little Bit of History Repeated* (Kunst-Werke Berlin, 2001), curated by Jens Hoffmann, result in the relegation of artists to deliverers of the curators' conceptual premise, while curatorial conceit acquires the status of quasi-artwork (Farquharson 2003). This more than common opinion seems to yearn after an upholding of the cultural value of the artist over curator within contemporary art exhibitions and has serious problems for the overall question of advocacy within the art world. As Gertrud Sandqvist has warned, the curated exhibition is not intended merely to reinforce the identity of the artist or of the curator. Instead of seeing curating as one of the rare, more intellectual, positions in the processes of art-circulation, there is a danger that curators may become mere agents for the artists and risk as a type of trademark. So, if the exhibition is a producer of meaning, then its purpose is different from the art market's, and possibly also from the artist's (Sandqvist 1999: 43–44). Finally, as Maria Lind has pointed out reverence towards the work of art has its own problematic: it is suspiciously close to resting upon ideas about art as detached from the rest of our existence; and it often conceals the concept of a curator as 'pure provider' who simply supports an artist without affecting the exhibition and its reception (Lind 1998).

The same old story of repressed histories: by way of concluding the beginning

Prior to the 1990s, few historical assessments or curatorial paradigms existed, let alone a discourse specific to contemporary curatorial practice. As an historical discourse, curating still has yet to be fully established as an academic field of enquiry. In *The Power of Display: A History of Installation at MoMA*, 1998, Mary Anne Staniszewski proposed that western art history had forgotten to take into account the functions performed by curating, exhibition design and spatially arranged exhibition forms. For Staniszewski, our relationship to this past is not only a question of what art is now seen to have been part of this history, but what kind of documentation and evidence of its display has survived. She writes: 'What is omitted from the past reveals as much about a culture as what is recorded as history and circulates as collective memory.' (Staniszewski 1998: xxi)

Visual effect, display and narrative are central to any curated exhibition. The exhibition remains the most privileged form for the presentation of art; thus, display may be understood as the core of exhibiting. Staniszewski suggests that the history of the exhibition is one of our most culturally 'repressed' narratives. The contextualization of space and its rhetoric have been overshadowed by the context of art in terms of epochs and artists' *oeuvre*, despite the fact that exhibition installations have had such a crucial significance for how meaning is created in art. One of the key factors in the production of artistic posterity is the dominance of the modernist 'white cube', which eliminated the context of architecture and space as well as of institutional conditions. According to Thomas McEvilley, the endurance of the power structures inherent to the white cube centres on that

[...] of undying beauty, of the masterpiece. But in fact it is a specific sensibility, with special limitations and conditions that is so glorified. By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing their sensibility. (McEvilley 1999: 9)

Hans Ulrich Obrist is one of numerous curators to have mirrored Staniszewski's assessment, by stating: 'seeing the importance of exhibition design provides an approach to art history that does acknowledge the vitality, historicity and the time and site bound character of all aspects of culture' (Obrist 2001a). He has claimed that this amnesia 'not only obscures our understanding of experimental exhibition history, it also affects innovative curatorial practice.' (Obrist 2001b) In many of the interviews I have conducted over the last few years, contemporary curators often refer to the amnesiac effect of missing literature, and what Brian O'Doherty called 'radical forgetfulness' towards innovative pre-white cube exhibition forms. So the institutionalization of 'the white cube' since the 1950s meant that 'presence before a work of art means that we absent ourselves in favour of the Eye and the Spectator.' (O'Doherty 1976) According to O'Doherty such a disembodied faculty meant that art was essentially seen as autonomous and experienced primarily by formal visual means.

Aside from the series of essays that made up *Inside the White Cube*, first published in *Artforum* in 1976, there had been very little subsequent examinations of display practices of the early twentieth century, less still the notion that contemporary art curation was affected by any lack of contextualizing history. The 1990s could be said to have begun the process of remembering, during a moment of emergency when curatorial programmes had little material to refer to by way of discourse specific to the curatorial field.

It was into this epistemic gap that contemporary curatorial discourse began to take shape in the 1990s, and a generation of curators emerged during what Michael Brenson called 'the curator's moment' (Brenson 1998). I would argue that the prioritization of all things contemporary within recent curatorial projects, alongside the concentration on an individualization of the curatorial gesture has created a particular strand of discourse that is hermetic at times. At the same time it is self-referential, curator-centred and, most evidently, in a constant state of flux: curatorial knowledge is now becoming a mode of discourse with unstable historical foundations.

From surveying the key debates within publications dedicated to contemporary curatorial practice, it is apparent that curatorial discourse is in the midst of its own production. Curating is 'becoming discourse' where curators are willing themselves to be the key subject and producer of this discourse. So far, for those unwilling to accept the provision made for the figure of the curator within the reconfigured cultural field of production, critical response has been maintained at the level of an over-simplified antagonism, where the practice(s) of artist and curator are separated out. If it is to continue, the gap between curatorial criticism and curator-led discourse will only widen further.

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CURATORIAL STRATEGY AS CRITICAL INTERVENTION: THE GENESIS OF *FACING EAST*

Liz Wells

Exhibition involves imposition of order on objects, brought into a particular space and a specific set of relations with one another. The ordering may be in accord with established classifications and habits of display or may challenge conventions; but is necessarily rhetorical in calling attention to artefacts brought together to be subjected to visual scrutiny. Exhibition commands visual attentiveness. This is taken for granted in museum and gallery studies.

The creative role of the curator is perhaps less well understood. The figure of the contemporary art curator is a relatively new feature of the world of the art museum (M/ 2004). I remember a photography conference at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, some years ago, when curators were referred to as 'the new carpetbaggers' of Europe. It is obvious why (insensitive) curators might acquire such a reputation, especially as curators work very closely with artists during periods of project development and, then, once an exhibition is over, from the artist's point of view, may seem to lose interest in their work. But the role of the curator is not well understood. Not long ago, a faculty Associate Dean, responsible for research in a post-92 British university (happily not the one where I work) commented to me that surely curating was 'just organizing'. My response was a little sharp! Someone else once remarked to me that he always thought of curators in terms of facilitation for artists, meaning that it hadn't previously occurred to him that curators might initiate an exhibition concept, seek out artists and research contexts, negotiate with galleries and publishers (for catalogues), in effect, shaping creatively in their own right. Indeed, some comments on the role of the curator do leave one wondering how exactly people think exhibitions come about!

Curating as research process

I curate exhibitions of landscape photography, which may include video and installation. Landscape can be defined as the cultural representation of space as place (Massey 2005). Site and space, political and spiritual identity, are complexly inter-woven. Landscape may affirm or extend our view of our relation with land, challenging dominant aesthetics and subject matter, bringing image and ideology into question. This chapter focuses on the genesis of a particular exhibition, *Facing East: contemporary landscape photography from Baltic areas*, in order to explore something about the making and workings of exhibitions. My central purpose is to argue for an understanding of curating as a research process which, as with any such process, involves investigation, discovery and critical reflection, central to which is the definition and refining of key research questions. I want also to indicate some of the ways in which an exhibition may stand as critical intervention.

How did this particular exhibition come about and what makes exhibitions substantial, let alone radical? It came about, as so often, through a form of serendipity. I had been working on British and American landscape photography, and I was considering broadening the horizons as I am researching a book on contemporary photographic landscape practices. Sian Bonnell, Director of Trace Gallery in Weymouth, who was involved in initial proposals for a photography festival in Bournemouth, approached me for an exhibition proposal and introduced me to those who run the gallery at the Arts Institute in Bournemouth, on the south coast of England, without whose support the project would not have happened. 'Text plus work' is their central gallery emphasis, and they wanted to commission a new show as their festival contribution. They were also interested in touring the exhibition for two years subsequent to the festival. In the event, the festival did not develop as originally envisaged, but the tour for this exhibition surpassed all expectations and was subsequently extended for a further year, having been booked for its sixth and seventh venues, a degree of circulation which is more or less unprecedented in contemporary photography in the United Kingdom.

When I was first approached, in 2002, I realized that the festival as planned would coincide with the enlargement of the European Union in May 2004, so it seemed obvious to look at a region within which there was a strong interest in landscape, and also a changing set of social and political relations. From a research point of view, the fundamental purpose of the project was critical evaluation of photographic work from Scandinavian and Baltic areas which takes land, landscape, identity and environment as thematic focus. My concern was with the relation between aesthetic strategies and ideological issues.¹ I applied to the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council) for funding, identifying key research questions as follows:

- Does contemporary landscape photography in Scandinavia and the Baltic States offer a challenge to more established aesthetics and concerns?
- If this is the case, in what respects is this challenge evident?

- What trajectories and differences can be discerned within and between the various nations, in terms of themes and aesthetics?
- How is landscape as a historical genre perceived by contemporary photographers?
- Is landscape photography in this region viewed in terms of the relation between land, landscape and identity – and how is this manifest?
- How does this relate to recent political histories, in particular the dominance of Soviet Russia in the east of the region for much of the twentieth century – affecting Finland as well as the Baltic States?

Of course, there are no comprehensive or conclusive answers – but these questions oriented the research and, thus, the final selection of work for the exhibition. I should add that, courtesy of the AHRC, I was able to travel extensively in the Baltic region, visiting archives and meeting with artists, curators and arts administrators, all of whom offered positive support for the project.²

It goes without saying that, in researching towards exhibitions, I read widely in terms of social and historical context as well as aesthetics and art history. I particularly explored previous exhibition catalogues, if they appear to have some bearing on my research questions. As with all research, it is difficult to identify the precise effects of preliminary research or to explicitly link initial processes of exploration with final exhibition outcomes. Arguably, the connection resides in the confidence with which it becomes possible to view, appraise and critically situate bodies of work, having previously informed oneself as fully as possible and stimulated visual appetite. Research comes to underpin curatorial 'voice'. Curatorial voice operates through initial definition of field and identification of key research questions, through selection of work, through the 'theatre' of exhibition which is fundamental to rhetorical affects, and through ways in which the project and the work of individual artists is contextualized in accompanying materials. Exhibitions wherein a curator has determined a theme or proposition, or used the work of others merely to illustrate it and produce writing geared towards anchoring and constraining interpretative potential, rarely hold interest for very long. But where an exhibition has been carefully thought through, substantially contributing to knowledge within a particular field, 'voice' operates complexly, in effect, setting up some sort of dialogue between works included, as well as between the curator and the works. The multiple discourses through which this dialogue resonates contribute to quality of audience engagement.

Facing East

Audience is a problematic notion. We can engage psychoanalytically and de-constructively with spectatorship processes, or we can follow Bourdieu into sociological analysis, but neither tells us much about what actually happens as individuals explore and respond to an exhibition (Bourdieu 1994; Bourdieu & Boltanski 1990). In many respects, viewers lie beyond curatorial control. In producing catalogue essays or exhibition statements, we assume that viewers have interests coinciding with that of the curator, in my case, combining the academic, the socio-political and the

aesthetic. Of course, they may not. At the initial opening of *Facing East*, I was approached by a Russian woman, now living in the south of England, who had come to see the work because it was from Baltic areas; she was thrilled to find the region where she was born depicted in the further reaches of one picture. There is no way I could have anticipated this. Likewise, at a previous exhibition, on women and landscape, which included work based in the Egyptian desert, an elderly man took little notice of the exhibition concept or the work but started recounting his wartime memories of crossing the desert.³ Such anecdotes remind us that 'audience' is essentially unknowable. Spectators forge an independent sense of an exhibition; they bring their own subjectivity, desires, history and cultural experiences into play.

Facing East includes fifteen bodies of work by sixteen artists (two work in collaboration) and encompasses a range of aesthetic strategies and thematic concerns. The artists included are based in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Denmark (Russia, Poland and Germany also have Baltic coasts, but their cultural centres lie elsewhere – Moscow, Berlin, Warsaw/Krakow). Given that little work from this region has been previously shown in Britain, I wanted to offer a fairly broad-based overview, indicating a range of photo-methods, issues and resonances. Indeed, if an exhibition is to offer some form of critical intervention, rhetorical tactics have to be carefully considered. The complexities of artists' intentions, concerns, working methods and contexts of production, aesthetic strategies and effects play a crucial role. From a curator's point of view, selection of work is central to critical strategy. Where possible I meet with artists since discussion about the genesis of specific projects and images and their critical reflections on their own work helps me to situate their work conceptually within an overall project as well as respecting their intentions, perceptions and preferences.

The title of the exhibition is deliberately enigmatic, which I hope attracts interest or speculation. There is some explanation in the booklet which accompanies the show: 'As borderline states between Soviet Russia and Western Europe, the Nordic countries and the smaller Baltic states have had to "face east". With the break-up of the former USSR, and the easing of travel restrictions across the Baltic Sea, they now face west. But, we "face east" to them. As the European Union enlarges, our curiosity about cultural difference extends.' In the text which accompanies the show, I added that 'To face east is to face the dawn, to witness new possibilities'. This chapter is to some extent based on the introductory text. The exhibition explores some of these new possibilities: changes and modes through which tensions between continuities and change are being explored.

The exhibition does not include older work; but historical research was essential in order to comprehend what might be under challenge. For instance, 'Explosion No. 1' by Petter Magnusson (Figure 1), a young Swedish photographer who spent some years studying in Norway, in effect challenges the Norwegian cultural icon of the mountain, which, as I found, was central to the photographic archive. The wooden house at the



Figure 1. Petter Magnussen, 'Explosion No. 1', 2002, original in colour.

foot of the mountain by a fjord, offering solitude away from city crowds, remains part of the Norwegian dream. This digital assemblage explodes the rural idyll, bringing together the house, the mountain and the drama of the clouds. Scale, composition and heavy framing parody the pictorialist. The explosion may reference mining that, with fisheries and North Sea oil, centrally supports the Norwegian economy. But meaning is to some extent open. Magnussen remarks,

It could be a disturbance or mining in a classic romantic landscape, with a possible ecological comment, or it could be war in the peaceful north, or an absurd attempt at terrorism outside of NY; or it could be some more mystical force in action, or the dream of an explosion, or an experiment in putting sublime forces/images up against each other in an investigation into an updated romanticism, a natural disaster, or even, as someone guessed, the peasant's home brewery exploding...⁴

Although certain openness of interpretation is integral to the picture, the mountainscape idyll is definitely in question. Likewise, as Norwegian photographer and archivist Per Olav Torgnesskar, in *Prospects*, 2002, reminds us through his series of 'postcard' images, rural

and small town scenes may be dull and journeys remarkably banal. This body of work was in two parts. First, fifteen images from an extensive series in which he used postcard size and format to make images of ordinary places. The pictures were based both upon actual images available to him as then an archivist in the Royal National Library, Oslo, and upon his memories of the endlessness of journeys with his parents as a child stuck in the back seat of a car with little of note to view. We also included video *Norwegian Scenarios*, 2000, constructed from television news footage which, again, testifies to the ordinariness of the everyday. Both photographers thus challenge the dominant iconography of the Norwegian landscape as snowy, mountainous sublime.

Exhibition installation enhances critical effect. Also concerned with contemporary Norway, Ane Hjort Guttu (like Torgnesskar, based in Oslo) links the effects of natural light with the modernistic, reflecting cultural change. Each picture in her series, *Modernistic Journey*, 2002, is intended as a separate image, but in the show we effectively constructed a diptych through juxtaposing a picture in which sunlight animates the upper edge of a mountain annexed with one in which sun falls across a modern apartment block; parallel geometries drawing attention to this paradoxical similarity of effect. Although each was made as a separate piece, through pairing two pictures I was able to suggest interrogation of the nature/culture binary. A further picture captures the reflection of a white block of flats in the lake landscaped into the foreground. The observer is not conceptualized as modernist in the sense of extolling modernity, so much as postmodern in observing ways in which culture incorporates nature. Landscape, however abstract and symbolic, is always at one level about place and human intervention. Layers of historical development are marked in Herkki-Erich Merila's series *Lunatica*, 1999, connoting moonlight and, of course, lunacy. Estonian rural scenes are viewed by night; the presence of roads and factories is marked. Fields have been harvested, but the hay now sits in the shadow of agri-industry. Car headlights – the ultimate symbol of everyday modernity – rather than moonlight, illuminate the harvest stacks and distant industrial plant. This is, of course, *somewhere*, but it also stands for *everywhere*. This series articulates tensions – nature/culture, tradition/modernity – within each image.

Critique is not always obviously integral to the image, especially cross-culturally. There is a well-worn joke about survival under the Soviets – you could become a communist, an alcoholic or a photographer. Photographers claimed to observe, and tell things as they appeared; it was difficult to condemn someone for documenting something. Gestures of resistance and renewal may be expressed through form. For many in the former Soviet states, landscape offered a relatively unconstrained field of practice; aside from restrictions on photographing in certain military areas, landscape photographers *could* experiment pictorially. Latvian photographer Mara Brasmane (Figure 2) worked in street documentary from the 1960s on; but she also explored the changing Daugava estuary from Riga to the Baltic coast, observing shapes made by plants within the flow of water or held within the illusory solidity of ice. Graphic surface, timelessness, repetition and cyclical renewal speak through this extensive series of work; light is part

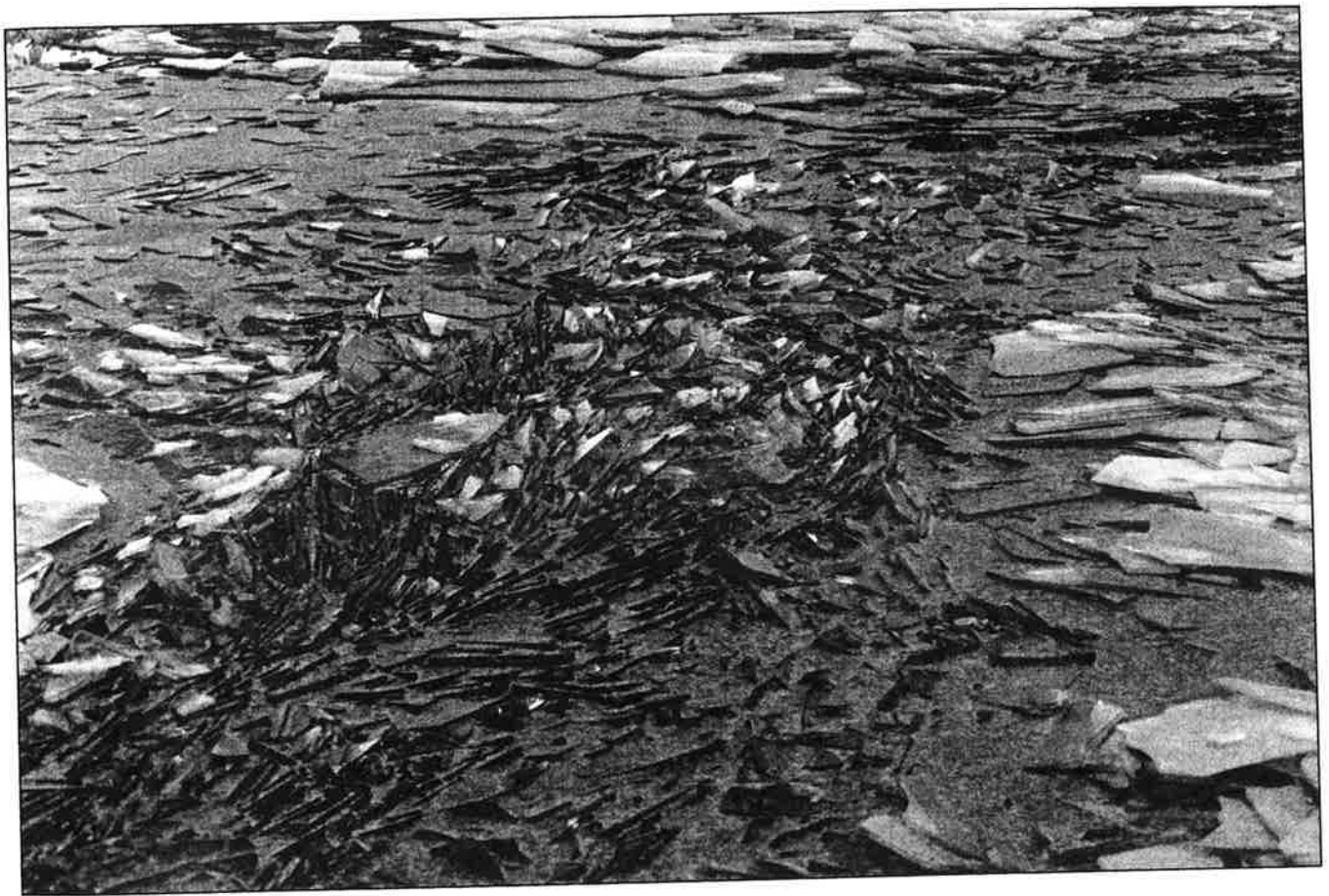


Figure 2. Mara Brasmane, from *Waters*, 1999–2001, original in colour.

of the 'moment' of the image, and nature seems transcendent. This appears traditional and, indeed, it is. But the work refuses the imperatives of socialist realism, in effect offering a mini-challenge within the particular historical context (although this work was not much exhibited in the Soviet era). Viewed in Britain it does beg explanation; my reasons for including it are not at first apparent.

Pictures by Lithuanian Remigijus Treigys, likewise untypical of the Soviet era, depict rural or coastal scenes from the Baltic coastal region where he lives. His *Distressed Landscapes*, 1999–2003, are dark and mysterious; shadows predominate and detail is obscure. Significantly, an essay on his work is titled 'The Invisible Side of the Void' (Naru 2004). Surface intrigues; he not only retains 'blemishes' but also touches the paper-enhancing marks of making; each image is, thus, unique. Treigys is one of a number of Baltic artists in the 1980s associated with what some critics defined as 'distressed aesthetics', involving emphasis on the pictorial and an eschewing of documentary idiom which together indicated refusal of the heroic norms of socialist realism. Again, in a British context, this is not immediately evident. Taken away from the Soviet context, the work resonates through complex layering of observation, association, perceptions of time and space, nostalgia, tone and mood and the geometry of the image. The exhibition text on which this essay draws comes into its own in indicating effects of such very different contexts and strategies relating to production. That said, neither

Brasmane nor Treigys were motivated in terms of resistance; their concerns are much more existential.

Use of colour is relatively recent in all three Baltic states; equipment is limited and materials are expensive. Thus, there has been a direct leap from the authoritative rhetoric of black and white to the fluidity of the digital. This is not uncontroversial. Andrejs Grants, who has been influential since the 1980s for naturalistic documentary and who seems to have taught every young photographer in Latvia, resists what he sees as the undermining of 'authority of record'.⁵ Some of his comments did seem to echo debates in Britain in the 1980s. But nothing directly replicates. Grants told me that he values 'mystery' in the picture; different layers, something spiritual. In a post-Soviet context emphasis on the existential also implies anti-materialism (in the Marxist sense), again, perhaps, passive resistance. Gatis Rozenfelds, who was taught by Grants, takes a different line on the advent of colour and the digital: he wants to challenge what he terms 'beauty landscape', to find something 'more truthful'.⁶ His series, *Weekends*, 2002, concerns the shaping of new suburban landscapes, but also explores colour as a means of speaking about land. The images note everyday scenes and, to British eyes, may appear relatively ordinary photographically. (British debates of the 1980s about colour and documentary seem outdated now!) In the Baltic region his work is seen as very original; it was included in the third Baltic triennial.⁷ I included it for two reasons: first, to balance the more abstract aesthetics seen in some of the Baltic work thus contributing to demonstrating to a British audience something of the range of contemporary interests and practices, and second, in terms of subject-matter, to indicate everyday ordinariness. It is quite difficult to place in relation to other work in the exhibition, as here it does not seem particularly radical, nor does it startle or entice. Interesting ontological points relating to digital colour as opposed to, what is clearly seen by some as, a more considered aesthetic of hand-printed monochrome, do not come across.

Considerations

Exhibition themes emerge as works are juxtaposed with one another. Exhibition space facilitates or constrains what can be achieved as both conceptual and aesthetic considerations are taken in to account in the hanging, along with basic practical issues such as where will larger work fit, which walls can take the weight of heavily framed pictures, what will be the effect of the movement of daylight near gallery windows, what space needs to be left clear around fire exits and so on. When I was first asked to talk about my experience as curator for the show, *Facing East* had been to two venues with rather different set-ups and audiences.⁸ The primary audience at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth is students and staff, although the gallery is also open to the public. By contrast, Impressions Gallery in York was a specialist photography gallery; the majority of visitors will have gone there intentionally and the exhibition attracted an apparently unprecedented level of interest for the time of year (4,708 visitors). Both these galleries differ from the three following venues, two of which are arts/media centres and the third of which is also the local library. In such cases, installation decisions have to take

into account attracting the attention of visitors whose reason for being there was, for instance, to go to the cinema. In such instances, questions of which work to hang opposite a cinema entrance, near a café, or down a corridor, become especially salient.

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth has two galleries across a corridor. Both galleries have large French windows and, in April/May, natural light was dramatic as it moved and changed the feel of the space over the course of each day. A short stroll allowed for most of the work to be scanned. What came to matter was that each body of work could hold its own within the space and that pictures were complemented and enhanced through juxtapositions. This meant paying attention to obvious issues such as being careful where smaller work, or work within which colour is less vibrant, were placed in relation to other works which threatened to dominate. The corridor came into its own as a space for the series of Norwegian 'postcards' and the effects of daylight in the galleries were utilized to emphasize Nordic qualities of light. Hanging decisions also entailed some thematic connections. For instance, colour documentary photographs from the woodlands of middle Sweden were hung facing colour imagery of wildlife in rural Finland. At Plymouth Arts Centre there are three galleries, only one of which has natural light, a factor which became crucial in determining which bodies of work were hung in that relatively small room. In York the gallery was radically different. Impressions Gallery – which closed in 2006 pending a move to Bradford, Yorkshire – was a converted house with five rooms on two floors and a hallway with stairs. Work by various artists had to be grouped in twos and threes, which made questions of aesthetic strategies and thematic links much more predominant. This changed the viewing experience as each room acquired a particular emphasis and atmosphere, and it was likely that the audience would view the show room by room.

For instance, in York, one of the upstairs galleries included work from Denmark and Sweden which variously speaks of communications and migrant labour. Denmark apart, the rural population throughout the region is sparse; many live in relative isolation. The climate is unforgiving, distances are extensive and train or road transport may be slow.

Landscape photography from Baltic areas

Winds howl across the flatlands of Denmark between the North Sea and the Baltic. Agriculture is now industrialized, but traditionally Denmark and South Sweden were family farming areas, rural communities, facing each other across the Øredok sound. Joakim Eskildsen's (Figure 3) tribute to his grandmother, is based on a not uncommon early twentieth-century story of sisters sent from the relatively poor south of Sweden to live and work on a farm in more affluent Denmark. This extract from a larger installation includes a portrait of his elderly grandmother and a study of her hand, on which years of manual labour seem etched. The black-and-white pinhole photo-aesthetic lends distance to the rural landscape, but, in fact, this was only three generations ago. We are reminded not only of personal history, but also of the relative speed of change. In *Øredok* (1998), John S. Webb documents this coastal area in south-west Sweden,



Figure 3. Joakim Eskildsen, from *Requiem*, 2000.

previously something of a nature reserve, now eroded by roads and industrial plants congregated around the motorway bridge which, since 2000, has linked Sweden with Denmark, finally terminating the relative isolation of the north from the rest of Western Europe. The work is in the form of a series of 360-degree panoramas, digitally stitched, and thus disorienting for those with intimate knowledge of the local landscape. The eight panoramas are mounted in two vertical blocks of four, each implied narrative of change underscoring others as we contemplate the changes wrought. In Sweden rural activities, such as berry-picking, formerly associated with family days out or community harvesting, have become organized commercially and, as Swedish artist Margareta Klingberg (Figure 4) notes, offer a source of seasonal employment for 'new Swedes' from eastern Asia and elsewhere and migrant workers from former Soviet areas. Woodlands and closeness to nature may remain a part of Swedish consciousness, but the realities of industry and city culture cut across traditional imagery.

The Finns are proud of their woodlands and lakes, but inland is also boggy and rugged; ice, snow and limited daylight in winter make existence and survival exceptionally difficult. Wild animals, and hunting, carry significance founded in need. The popularity of wildlife photography, involving treks to forest hides, echoes this – the photograph acting as substitute 'trophy'! Juha Suonpää's (Figure 5) humorous, anti-pastoral pictures, mostly from the eastern border forests, formed part of his doctoral study of this masculine pastime. At one level, the work is humorous: a bear, eating convenience food, stands still to be photographed, and a photographer disguises himself behind a tree, wearing antlers, to fool passing wildlife. This image along with Magnussen's explosion were the two pictures favoured by the various galleries for private view invitations and more general PR. Indeed, the (badly) disguised photographer features on the front cover of the Arts Institute booklet accompanying the exhibition. They are striking images, but so are many of the others in the show; I presume it is thought that humour and paradox seduce contemporary audiences. But a number of more symbolic points are encoded: the blues of the sky and the water in which a cow has drowned precisely match that of the Finnish flag, and a distant line where managed forestry gives way to wilderness marks the Russian border. From a Finnish perspective the implications of this are multi-layered, simultaneously reminding us that Russia once ruled Finland, and noting the unruliness of the landscape on the Russian side of the



Figure 4. Margareta Klingberg, from *From Home*, 2001–2002, original in colour.

border whilst, paradoxically, regretting loss of Finnish wilderness as it has given way to managed woodlands. Indeed, forestry is now big business; birch trees, which once grew randomly amongst the lakes, now stand regimented through organized planting. Commercial logging has cleared acres of woodland. In their extensive visual research on change in northern forest areas, Ritva Kovalainen and Sanni Seppo comment on the implications of the loss of what for many is a primary space of contemplation, a part of Finnish identity; a spiritual home. Their starting point for *The End of the Rainbow* was an interest in the spiritual and the shamanistic, although as the visual research developed it became increasingly analytical and political (Kovalainen and Seppo 1997). Their concern is with the disappearance of forest, change in the Finnish woodland landscape and forest identity; for the Finns, forest is crucial space of spiritual replenishment, where human culture remains relatively unmarked. But after 50 years of intensive logging nearly all the natural forests have disappeared. The project is ongoing. *Facing East* includes two long panoramas (2003) portraying individuals in rural spaces clearly in process of change. The artists also interview these local habitants who recount memories of their place within the woods and what the woodlands meant to them (headsets allow visitors to simultaneously listen to the interviews). Indeed, industrial development in Finland only dates from the second half of the twentieth century; nature remains central to Finnish 'soul'; summertime in the lakes or gathering wild berries and mushrooms in autumn is still common. The sauna cabin by the cold



Figure 5. Juha Suonpää, from *Wilderness*, 1990s, original in colour.

lake offers an elemental spiritual experience, transcending simple cleansing and health. Just *being* is important; in *Like a Breath in Light* (ongoing) Marja Pirelä's breathing is marked in a series of images taken at different times of year, always from the same position, sitting with a pinhole camera on her knee, facing north across the lake, open to the effects of elemental light and colour. The ensuing abstract images are suspended behind glass, as a group of floating impressions of light and colour, shifting in intensity in response to movement of light within the gallery.

The University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, capital of Finland, is a major centre for masters and doctoral level studies in photography. Professor Jorma Puranen's

1990–1991 series on Lapland, language and nomadic Sami peoples are widely known in Britain (Gupta 1993). The critical foundations of his work offer an influential example of the social and philosophic edge that we can expect from contemporary Finnish landscape photography. Jari Silomäki, in his *Weather Diary* (ongoing), points to tension between the global and the local, as place, personal experience and the distant backdrop of world events blend together. To play with words, they are 'con-fused' into a sometimes uneasy relationship which confuses any sense of specificity of individual experience. Every day he takes a photograph, printing in colour and hand-writing some comment on it which relates to that day's experience. The comment may reference the news, or world events, or his own immediate personal situation and experience. That this is amalgamated from his point of view is inscribed through his own handwriting. Depth of colour reflects light and exposure times, maybe linked to events. For instance, on the day on which Silomäki made for 'Turku, the day US bombed Afghanistan', he was expecting the news. He had his camera set up on a tripod, ready for exposure for the length of the news item; hence, the purple intensity of the sky. Several of his daily photographs are shot in northern Nordic nightlight, where the sun never quite sets, reminding us of extraordinary qualities of the landscape there. Riitta Päiväläinen's

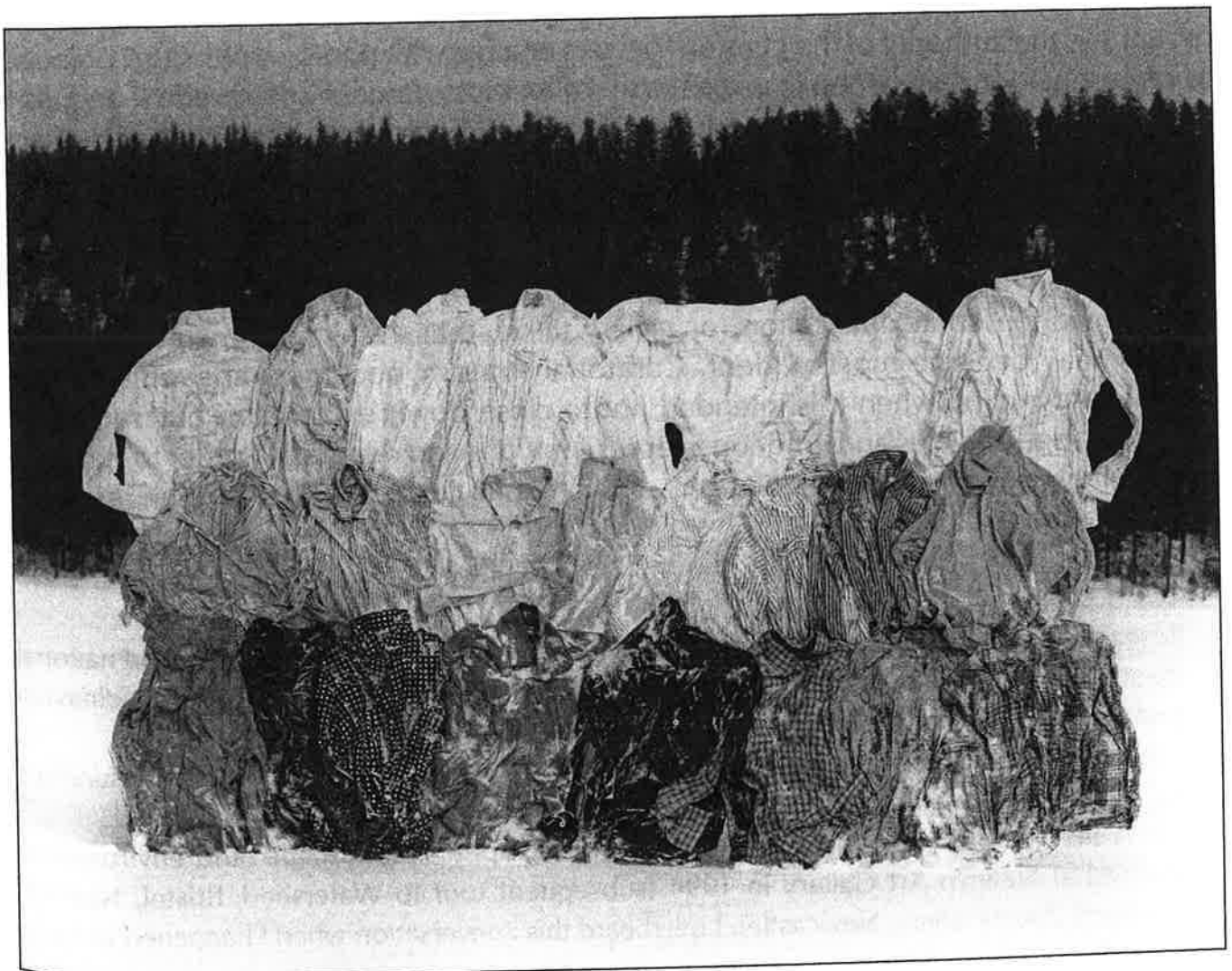


Figure 6. Riitta Päiväläinen's, 'Portrait', 2001, from *Vestige – ice series*, original in colour.

(Figure 6) evocative photographs of clothing, standing upright, frozen in the icy landscape, eerily devoid of the people who might have once worn the garments, imply human transience and vulnerability relative to continuity or change in land and landscape.

Conclusion

If exhibition articulates curatorial 'voice' through research parameters and through selection of work to be included, then installation operates as evocation. As I have indicated, gallery space influences ways of working. For instance, the more narrative series about work and transport links, Eskildson's grandmother, Klingberg's foreign workers and Webb's new roadways were grouped together. The frozen shirts, the pinholes of the lake and the daily diary formed a further, more philosophical, grouping. At Impressions Gallery they shared one of the upstairs galleries, creating an intensity of reference to sky and snow in what the Programme Manager nicknamed the 'ice' room.

In summary, we can conceptualize curatorial voice and strategy in terms of a number of inter-related levels of evocation. Artists 'speak', more or less assertively, through their work. To some extent, work is appropriated to the interests and vision of the curator, although, in my experience work refuses subjugation. Artistic affects are contained by, or rupture, the authority of the curator. Viewers engage with photographs as art objects, as representations, as symbolic instigators – of memory, fantasy and reverie – and, as I have already remarked, respond for themselves. Comments and feedback often surprise me. This encounter is ordered through the selection and juxtaposition of imagery within the specific gallery space which, in effect, results from dialogue between the curator and the works. It is also inflected through interpretative indicators in accompanying labels or catalogue essays. Indeed, it is through installation, and through written contextualization (or gallery talks), that the critical intentions of the curator may become most evident. Curatorial strategy becomes most effective as critical intervention when it is intended not to close down exploration but, rather, to invoke a range of issues and emotions, representations and debates, in order to provoke continuing curiosity and speculation – which in its turn may fuel further research questions and explorations.

Notes

1. Research for the exhibition also underpins a chapter on landscape photography and national identity in my forthcoming book, *Land Matters* (working title), in which I take Scandinavian and Baltic work as a case study.
2. I should like to acknowledge the support of AHRC, and also of FRAME the Finnish fund for art exchange for funding transport of Finnish works to the UK.
3. Liz Wells' (curator) *Viewfindings: women photographers, 'landscape' and environment* opened at Newlyn Art Gallery in 1994 (subsequent tour to Watershed, Bristol; NMPFT, Bradford; Zone Gallery, Newcastle). I overheard this conversation when I happened to be in the gallery.
4. E-mail from artist, 23rd February 2004.

5. Andrejs Grants, discussion with author, Riga, August 2003.
6. Discussion with artist Riga, August 2003.
7. *What is Important?* 3rd Ars Baltica Triennial of Photographic Art, tour, Baltic region 2003–2005.
8. The exhibition opened at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth in April 2004, then toured to Impressions Gallery, York (20 November 2004–22 January 2005). By the time of finalizing this paper for publication it had also shown at Plymouth Arts Centre (spring 2005), Lighthouse Media Centre, Wolverhampton (May 2005) and the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock (autumn 2005). Further bookings include Tulley House and Gallery, Carlisle (autumn 2006) and The Yard Gallery, Nottingham (spring 2007).

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CRITICAL SPATIAL PRACTICE: CURATING, EDITING, WRITING

Jane Rendell

With a background in architectural design, followed by doctoral research in architectural history, and then a period teaching public art and writing art criticism, my work has focused on interdisciplinary meeting points between different disciplines – between feminist theory and architectural history, conceptual art practice and architectural design, art criticism and autobiographical writing. Through collaborative and individual research, both books and exhibitions, this chapter looks at a number of curatorial and editorial projects I have been involved in from the late 1990s and how these relate to my work as a sole author of architectural history and art criticism.

In exploring issues of method or process that discussions of interdisciplinarity inevitably bring to the fore, Julia Kristeva has argued for the construction of 'a diagonal axis':

Interdisciplinarity is always a site where expressions of resistance are latent. Many academics are locked within the specificity of their field: that is a fact...the first obstacle is often linked to individual competence, coupled with a tendency to jealously protect one's own domain. Specialists are often too protective of their own prerogatives, do not actually work with other colleagues, and therefore do not teach their students to construct a diagonal axis in their methodology.¹

Engaging with this diagonal axis demands that we call into question what we normally take for granted, that we question our methodologies, the ways we do things, and our terminologies, what we call what we do. The construction of 'a diagonal axis' is necessarily a difficult business. Kristeva's phrase 'expressions of resistance' suggests that the problem encountered when disciplinary procedures are questioned is related

to identification, a key term in psychoanalytic theory.² And in using the term 'ambivalent' to describe the encounter between disciplines – an 'ambivalent movement between pedagogical and performative address' – Homi Bhabha also points to the unconscious qualities at work in interdisciplinary practice.³ It is precisely for this reason that I am a passionate advocate for interdisciplinarity; such work is not only critical and intellectual, but also emotional and political. In demanding that we exchange what we know for what we don't know, and give up the safety of competence for the dangers of potential incompetence, the transformational experience of interdisciplinary work produces a potentially destabilizing engagement with dominant power structures allowing the emergence of new and often uncertain forms of knowledge.

Strangely Familiar

Strangely Familiar: Narratives of Architecture in the City – an exhibition, symposium and catalogue, whose working group included architects, graphic designers, film-makers, multimedia artists – was produced as a response to an invitation to curate and design an architectural exhibition. The curatorial and editorial team, comprising Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Alicia Pivaro and myself, chose to critique the notion of architectural history written only by architectural historians, consisting of boards on walls describing the work of famous architects.⁴ Instead we invited academics from disciplines outside as well as inside architecture, such as cultural studies and geography, to provide a narrative

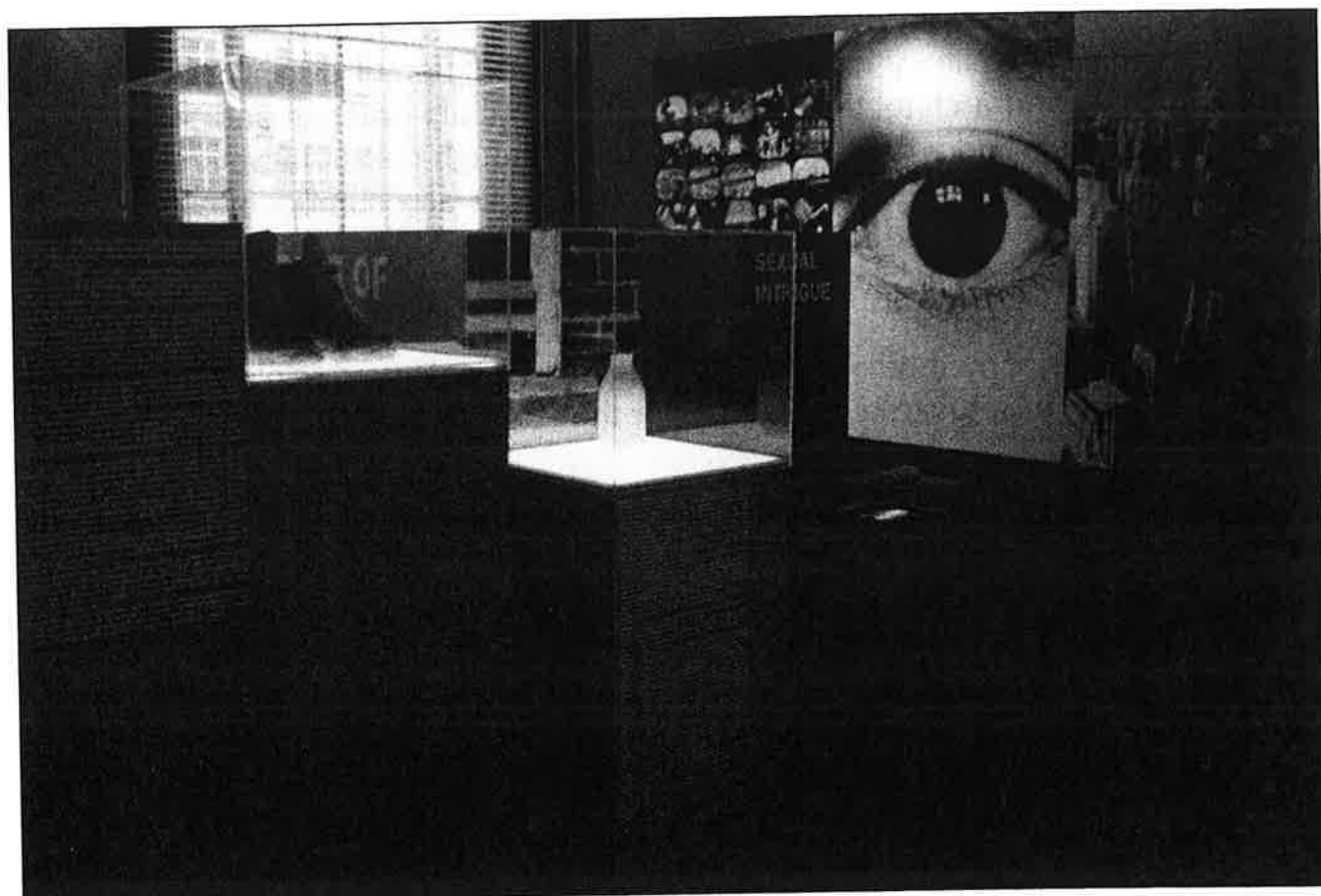


Figure 1. *Strangely Familiar*, The Royal Institute of British Architects' Gallery, London, 1995.

(a thousand-word text), several images and an object related to a specific site in a city. The catalogue comprised an edited collection of these visual narratives, while the exhibition took the form of a mini 'Manhattan' built of coloured plinths, one for each contributor including their narrative and related object.

Each interpretative stance revealed a place that was 'strangely familiar', familiar because certain aspects were already known, strange because they were revealed in new ways. The contributions investigated a diverse range of subjects and adopted a variety of interpretive and analytical procedures. From these, *Strangely Familiar* identified three editorial and curatorial themes for engaging with public space: memory and remembering; domination, resistance and appropriation; experience and identity. We adopted these themes as organizational strategies that worked to give the catalogue a conceptual clarity and the exhibition an aesthetic coherence using different colours to indicate one of the conceptual themes. Yet in hindsight the strong visual identity of both catalogue and exhibition made it difficult for the more complex, subtle and often unrecognizable tactics of urban resistance to emerge.⁵ In order to develop further the dialogue between design intention and user occupation, for *The Unknown City*, the book that followed *Strangely Familiar*, we extended our editorial invitation to contribute essays to practitioners as well as theorists, asking artists, writers, film-makers and architects to comment on how they understood the relationship between the production and experience of the city.⁶

Intersections

In my view, the edited book is an invaluable site for developing both multi- and interdisciplinary debates. The editorial process has, for me, often involved identifying a new area of study, one located at the meeting point between previously distinct and separate areas of thought. This was the case for *Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, where we, myself along with co-editors Iain Borden and Barbara Penner, brought together over 30 seminal texts relevant to studying the relationship between feminist theory and architectural space. We organized the book into three sections, the first and the third parts both followed a historical trajectory which explored the development of feminist theory over the past 30 years, through gender and women's studies in the former and architectural design, history and theory in the later. In the middle section we adopted a spatial rather than temporal attitude to our editorial role, and selected essays drawn from a number of related fields, from anthropology to philosophy, to indicate the broad range of disciplinary procedures pertinent to the study of gender and space. For *InterSections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, a set of specially commissioned essays, which I co-edited with Iain Borden, we took a different approach to our editorial role and approached architectural historians and theorists, asking each author to address the relationship between critical theory and architectural history in their own work and to develop an essay which explored their own research processes and the development of their conceptual thinking as integral to the subject matter of the chapter.⁷

At the same time as working on these edited volumes in my own individual research, I was investigating the interdisciplinary meeting point between feminist theory and architectural history, specifically examining the ways in which feminist theory questions the methods of architectural historical enquiry, the subjects and objects we choose to study and the ways in which we study them. For *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, I was seduced by two texts, one a feminist polemic, the other an urban narrative.⁸ These two texts created places of methodological struggle – dialectical sites where questions of spatial and historical knowledge were raised – where I was located between theory and history. It was the intellectual labour involved in sketching out this theoretical context for conducting feminist architectural history in my individual research that enabled me to locate the key works on gender, space and architecture in numerous disciplines and realize that there was a need to bring them together in one edited volume.

A Place Between

It is also possible for individual research and collaborative research to work the other way around, for an edited project to establish themes, which can then be explored further through an authored book. When I was invited to guest edit an issue of *The Public Art Journal*, I asked a number of theorists and practitioners to reflect on my proposition: in what ways could public art be thought of as social space. I was interested in how various forms of ‘spatial practice’ carried out by public artists engaged with the kind of issues developed through ‘spatial theory’, in the writings of cultural geographers and critical theorists. The various artists and writers who contributed to the volume each addressed public art as ‘a place between’, from art and architecture collaborative muf, who discussed their work in terms of a place between people, as ‘what it takes to make a relationship to make a thing’, through to cultural geographer Steve Pile’s essay on the city as a place between what is ‘real’ and what is dreamed.⁹

For several years after the publication of the journal, I continued to position myself in ‘a place between’ art and architecture, theory and practice, exploring the patterning of intersections between this pair of two-way relationships. In *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* I traced the multiple dynamics of this investigation and, in so doing, drew on a range of theoretical ideas from a number of disciplines to examine artworks and architectural projects. At its core, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* is concerned with a specific kind of practice, one that is both critical and spatial, and that I call ‘critical spatial practice’. In art such work has been variously described as contextual practice, site-specific art and public art; in architecture it has been described as conceptual design and urban intervention. To encounter such modes of practice, I visit works produced by galleries that operate ‘outside’ their physical limits, commissioning agencies and independent curators who support and develop ‘site-specific’ work and artists, architects and collaborative groups that produce various kinds of critical projects from performance art to urban design.¹⁰ Although described as an authored book, this project could also be thought of in a curatorial sense, as the selection and arrangement of a number of artworks and architecture projects.

It is perhaps through distinct forms of selection and arrangement that the difference between editorial and curatorial practice is defined in my work. Both roles, curator and editor, work by continually developing and clarifying the relation between the establishment of a theme at an initial and general level, followed by the selection of works that indicate the range and scope of possibility inherent within a theme, concluding with particular manifestations of that theme through the specific contributions. The degree to which the editor/curator imposes and follows through the potential offered by an initial conceptual framework varies, from those projects where the individual works, often artefacts that have already been produced (as in *Gender, Space, Architecture*), realize a pre-existing thematic, to those where the production of new works generates the final composition both materially and conceptually, often involving a critique of the initial editorial/curatorial proposal. However, the activities of editor and curator differ according to the qualities, codes and processes associated with the contexts in which they operate, while texts and books traditionally prioritize sequence, where arrangements tend to be structured according to the 'before' and the 'after', objects and sites allow for more spatial possibilities in arrangement, allowing multidirectional aspects of production and reception to come to the fore particularly through simultaneity and juxtaposition.

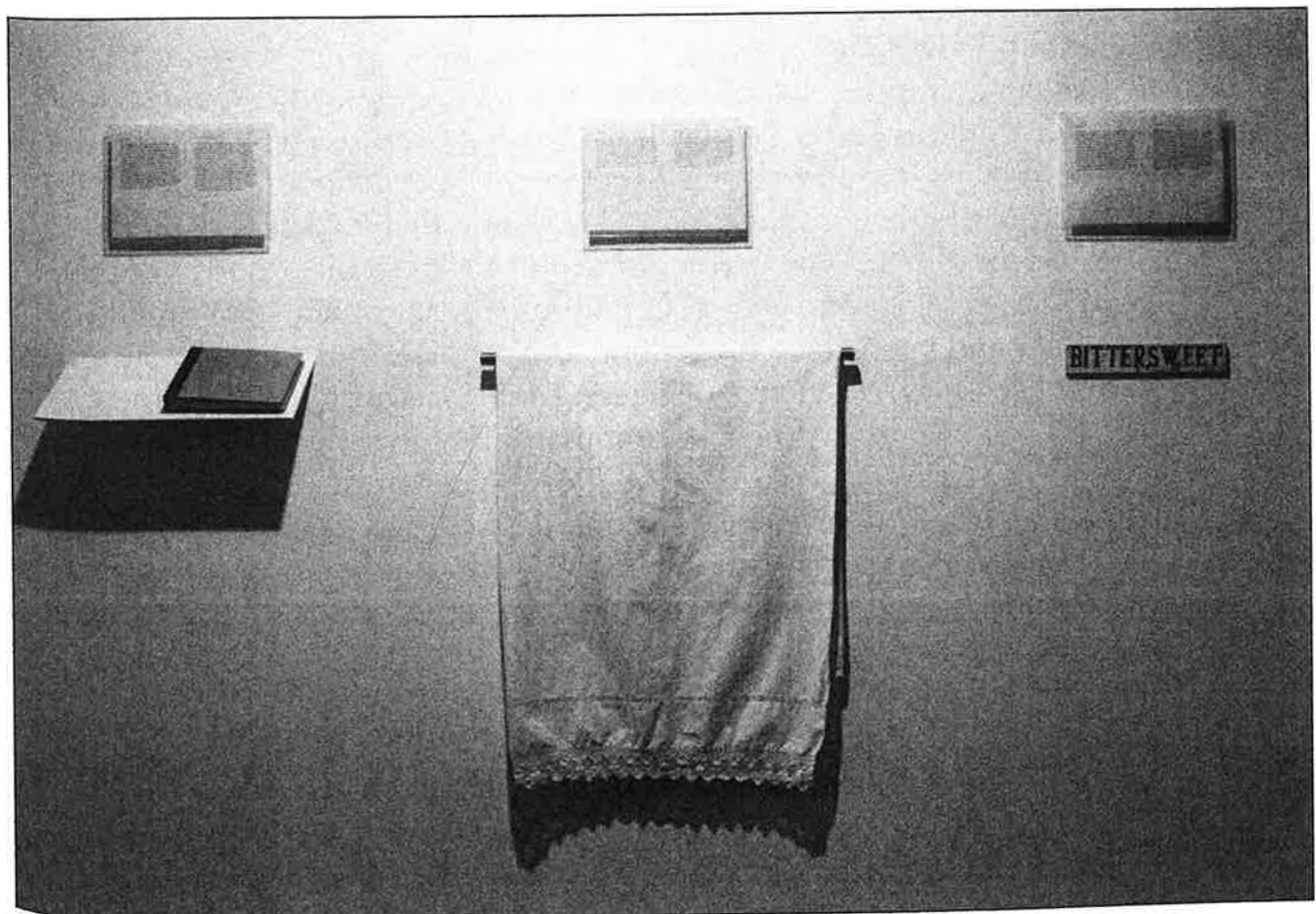


Figure 2. Jane Rendell, 'Les Mots and Les Choses', 2002, *Material Intelligence*, Entwistle Gallery, London. Photograph: Entwistle Gallery 2002.

Material Intelligence

In 2003, I became involved in curating an architectural exhibition, but in an informal capacity through conversations with Bobbie Entwistle who approached staff and students at the Bartlett School of Architecture to contribute to an exhibition at the Entwistle Gallery, which became called *Material Intelligence*. The works she selected for the exhibition constituted artefacts that had been produced as part of an architectural design process; for example, drawings, photographs, models and other types of object. An important discussion focused on whether the exhibits required any written or spoken explanation, for example, in the form of accompanying statements drafted by the curator or narratives written by the architects. We both agreed that the exhibition was stronger visually without texts placed on the gallery walls. But in retrospect, in my opinion, this decision produced a problem. An art gallery setting expects and effects specific conditions, positioning all objects within its physical parameters as 'artworks'. *Material Intelligence* was no exception. As a result, the artefacts exhibited were viewed as artworks not as part of architectural design process. This resulted in a tendency to consider them as isolated objects when they had been fabricated not as solo entities but with an imagined other in mind – an architectural design, in some cases an intended 'building'. An accompanying narrative might then have worked, not to explain the artefacts on display, but to situate them in relation to the objects to which they implicitly referred, and to architectural design discourse as well as fine art.

Spatial Imagination in Design

During 2005, as director of a research cluster, 'Spatial Imagination in Design', funded by the EPSRC and AHRC as part of *Designing for the 21st Century*, I had the opportunity to work with colleagues Peg Rawes and Penelope Haralambidou in an editorial and curatorial capacity, and much of the project description that follows is drawn from as well as developed out of the editorial introduction to the project co-authored with Rawes.¹¹ Our cluster was composed of fifteen members, drawn from architecture, exhibition, product and interactive design; fine and public art; psychotherapy, history, economics and philosophy; structural engineering and construction management, with project partners Kate Trant of CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) and Greg Cowan of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architecture). Through a series of three workshops, each one devised and led by different cluster members, we explored the spatial imagination as a mode of perception and tool of production in the experience and design of space, through particular design processes of 'modeling', 'writing' and 'drawing'.¹²

From the outset it was the group's intention to develop their understandings of the spatial imagination through the production of artefacts. The site chosen for the exhibition of these works, The Domo Baal Gallery, housed in an eighteenth-century house in Clerkenwell, London, provided an important context for the development of the research – this was a location that provoked the spatial imagination of all members of the cluster both through the architectural features of the original design, but also

Designed between 1730 and 1750, the textured edge and central rose of the white ceiling in the main first-floor room of the gallery were the most evocative manifestations of the delicacy of spatial imagination in the rococo, an architectural style connected with this historical period. The initial occupation of the building as a family home and a solicitor's office had left traces, for example, in the form of a double door, hinting at the complex negotiations between domestic and institutional space which continue in the building today, where the everyday and private life of a family coincide closely with the ongoing and public activities of an art gallery.

This space provided an opportunity for each cluster member to make a new work which drew on collective understandings gained from previous conversations, visits and walks, yet informed by each individual's own particular interest in the spatial imagination. The final works exhibited as *Spatial Imagination* took the form of proposals and exhibits – including sound pieces, texts, drawings and models – that operated across the disciplines of art, design and architecture and communicated the spatial imagination through a configuration of material designs.

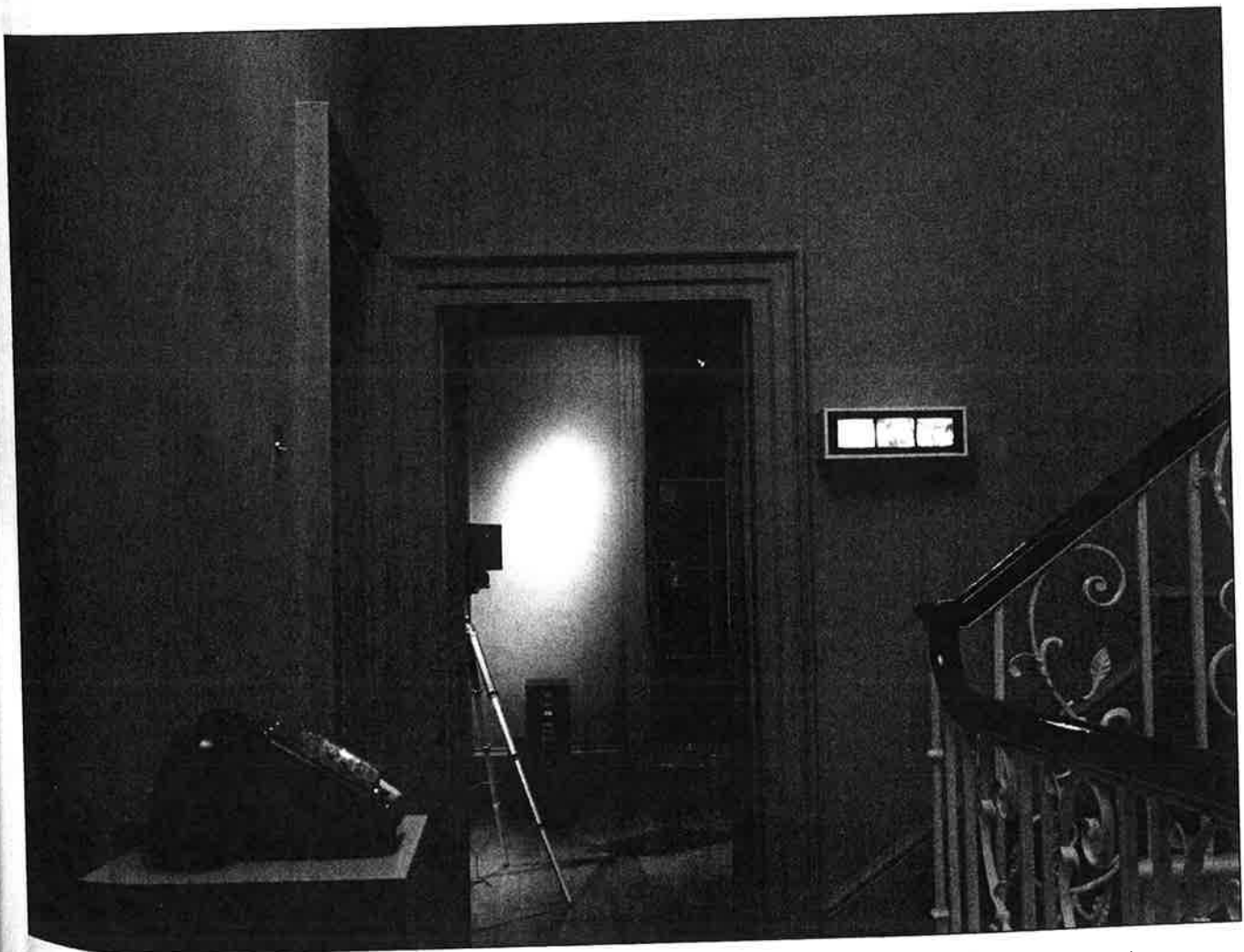
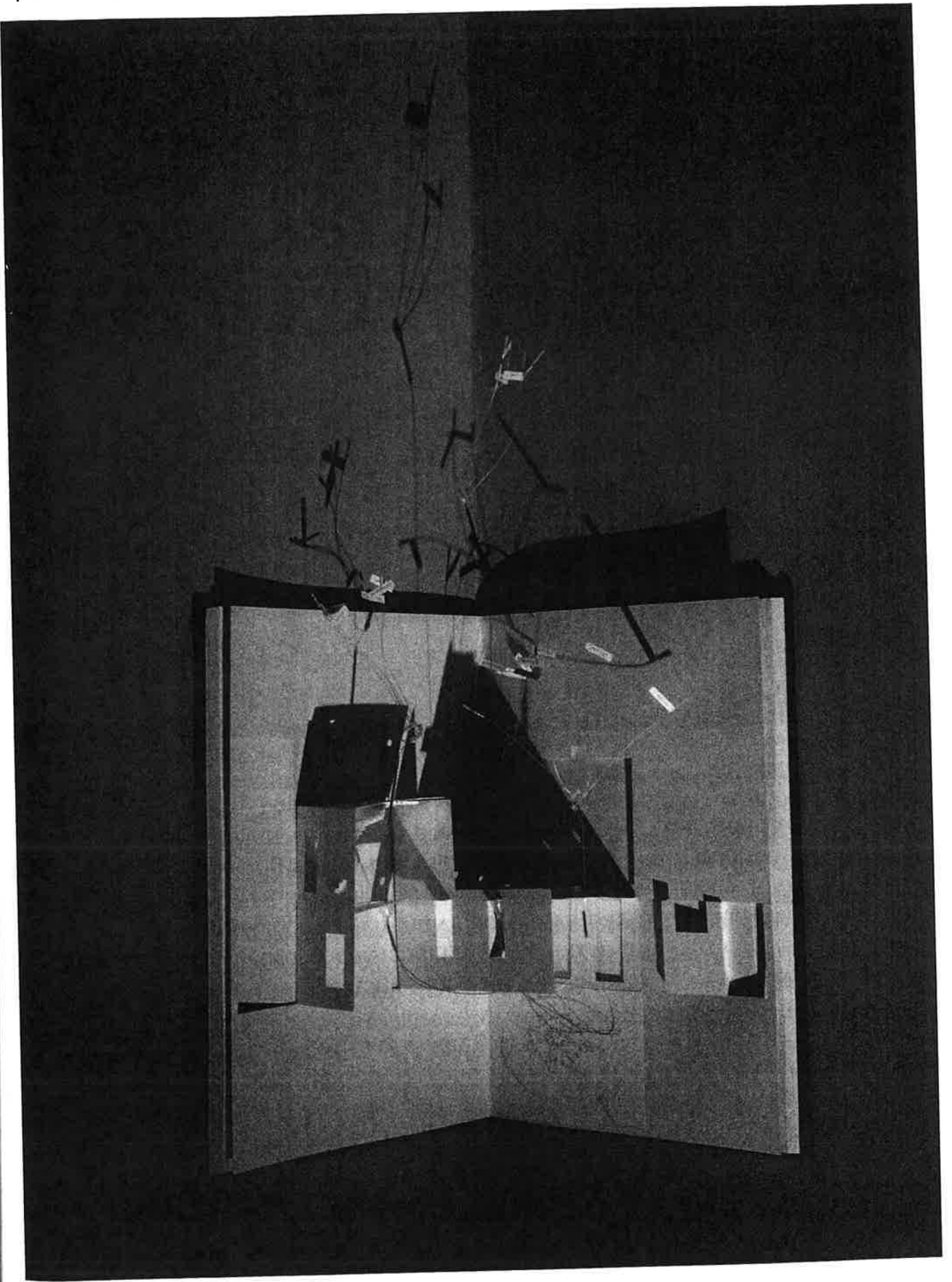


Figure 3. The work of Peg Rawes (foreground), Katja Grillner (mid-ground), Nat Chard (background), Rory Hamilton (far wall), *Spatial Imagination*, The Domo Baal Gallery, London, 2005. Photograph: David Cross of Cornford & Cross.



Out of the production of these art and design works, three key preoccupations emerged: first, an interest in the use of the imagination in the operation of political power – both as a tool of oppression and of resistance; second, an understanding of imagination as a space of ambiguity between designer and user; and third, a desire to combine the traditionally separated design processes of drawing, writing and modelling in new hybrid forms of art, design and architectural practice. For example, artist Brigid McLeer's 'writing-as-drawing', located in the gap between the double doors, in re-writing Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* (1957), which explored how the emotion of jealousy heightens the perception of space between individuals. In placing the architectural model she produced as a design tool for curating the exhibition in the corner of the gallery, architect Penelope Haralambidou's 'drawing-as-model' demonstrated the extent to which the imagination produces multiple space-times, producing a *mis-en-abyme* or a space within a space. In repeatedly writing the word 'purdah' (a word which refers to a screen or architectural element as well as a veil or item of clothing), my own work transformed the first-floor window to the street – an architectural site of visual connection – into a screen – one of separation. Where the definition of purdah in certain versions of the Koran demands covering as a response



Figure 5. Jane Rendell, 'An Embellishment: Purdah', 'Spatial Imagination', The Domo Baal Gallery, London, 2005. Photograph: David Cross of Cornford & Cross.

to female embellishment, 'An Embellishment: Purdah' suggested that artifice structures rather than decorates divisions in the gendering of space.

Each piece was an example of the materialization of the spatial imagination in action, drawing attention to the important role practice-led research plays in critiquing the traditional methods of academic research as well as the conventions of architectural design. As physical statements, the exhibits did not seek to be understood as demonstrations or applications of pre-existing theoretical ideas, but rather as provisional works, which registered the importance of discovery in the process of art, design and architecture. The accompanying catalogue played a key role in providing a view of the works in progress. In the editorial we offered a framework for thinking about the ways in which the cluster's research interests ran through the different practices, methods and works in the exhibition. And through image and text, each cluster member contributed their own perspective on the various ways in which the spatial imagination is both a tool for investigation and proposition in the design of objects and spaces.

Critical Architecture

Over the past two years, I have also been working on another collaborative project, *Critical Architecture*, with Mark Dorrian, Murray Fraser and Jonathan Hill, this time a conference, a special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* and a co-edited book. *Critical Architecture* brings together essays and projects that examine the relationship between criticism and critical practice in architecture, exploring architectural criticism as a form of practice and considering the different modes of critical practice that comprise architectural design – buildings, drawings and texts – as forms of criticism. The division of criticism and design in architecture hinders the production of innovative work, and so we decided to locate the themes of *Critical Architecture* at four different intersections between architectural criticism and architectural design: 'Criticism/Negation/Action' (Mark Dorrian), 'The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture' (Murray Fraser), 'Criticism by Design' (Jonathan Hill) and 'Architecture-Writing' (Jane Rendell). These conceptual strands structured the conference and the special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* and will be used to frame the debates in the co-edited book. The themes reflect issues of concern to practitioners and theorists alike, and allow the relation between criticism and design to be negotiated by contributors in varying ways.

'Architecture-Writing', my own particular theme, explores the new ways of writing architectural criticism produced when criticism is considered a form of critical practice. Discussions in art criticism concerning art-writing have begun to introduce questions of subjectivity, positionality, textuality and materiality in new critical writing practices and re-think the relationship between criticism and critical practice in the visual and performing arts.¹³ I am interested in how the issues this debate raises might allow us to speculate upon the relation of creative practice in architectural and spatial criticism.

Recently in my own writing as an art and architectural critic I have explored the position of the author, not only in relation to theoretical ideas, art objects and architectural

spaces but also to the site of writing itself. This interest has evolved into a number of 'site-writings' that investigate the limits of criticism and ask what it is possible for a critic to say about an artist, an architect, a work, the site of a work and the critic herself and for the writing to still 'count' as criticism. Elsewhere I have outlined in more detail the conceptual framing of this project;¹⁴ here I will briefly summarize these concerns before ending this chapter by presenting a piece of 'site-writing'.

Site-writing

Feminists in visual and spatial culture have drawn extensively on psychoanalytic theory to further understandings of subjectivity in relation to positionality, making connections between the spatial politics of internal psychical figures and external cultural geographies.¹⁵ I am interested in how art criticism can engage with this work in order to investigate the spatial and often changing positions we occupy as critics materially, conceptually, emotionally and ideologically.¹⁶ Such a project involves rethinking the terms of criticism, specifically judgment, discrimination and critical distance.¹⁷ 'Site-writing' takes up this challenge and by repositioning the artwork as a site, starts to investigate the spatiality of the critic's relation to a work, adopting and adapting both Howard Caygill's notion of strategic critique,¹⁸ as well as Mieke Bal's exploration of the critic's 'engagement' with art.¹⁹ Current discussions concerning relational aesthetics²⁰ and dialogic practice²¹ continue to position the critic 'outside' the artwork; I suggest instead that the position the critic occupies needs to be made explicit through the process of writing criticism. Rather than write *about* the artwork, I am interested in how the critic constructs his or her writing in relation *to* and in dialogue *with* the artwork. The focus on the preposition here allows a direct connection to be made between the positional *and* the relational.²²

Theoretical explorations in literary criticism of the author's different subject positions in relation to the text, as multiple 'I's' as well as 'you' and 's/he' are of relevance here,²³ as are the writings of post-colonial critics who have woven the autobiographical into the critical in their texts, combining poetic practice with theoretical analysis to articulate hybrid voices.²⁴ To consider questions of voice in criticism, in connection to relation, dialogue and encounter, involves objective and subjective, as well as distant and intimate positions. From the close-up to the glance, from the caress to the accidental brush, such an approach can draw on spaces as they are remembered, dreamed and imagined, as well as observed, in order to position and re-position critic and reader in relation to a work and challenge criticism as a form of knowledge with a singular and static point of view located in the here and now.

'Site-writing' is what happens then, when discussions concerning site-specificity extend to involve art criticism, and the spatial qualities of the writing become as important in conveying meaning as the content of the criticism.²⁵ My suggestion is that this kind of criticism or critical spatial writing, in operating as mode of a practice in its own right, questions the terms of reference that relate the critic to the artwork positioned 'under' critique. This is an active writing that constructs as well as traces the sites between critic and writer, artist and artwork, viewer and reader.

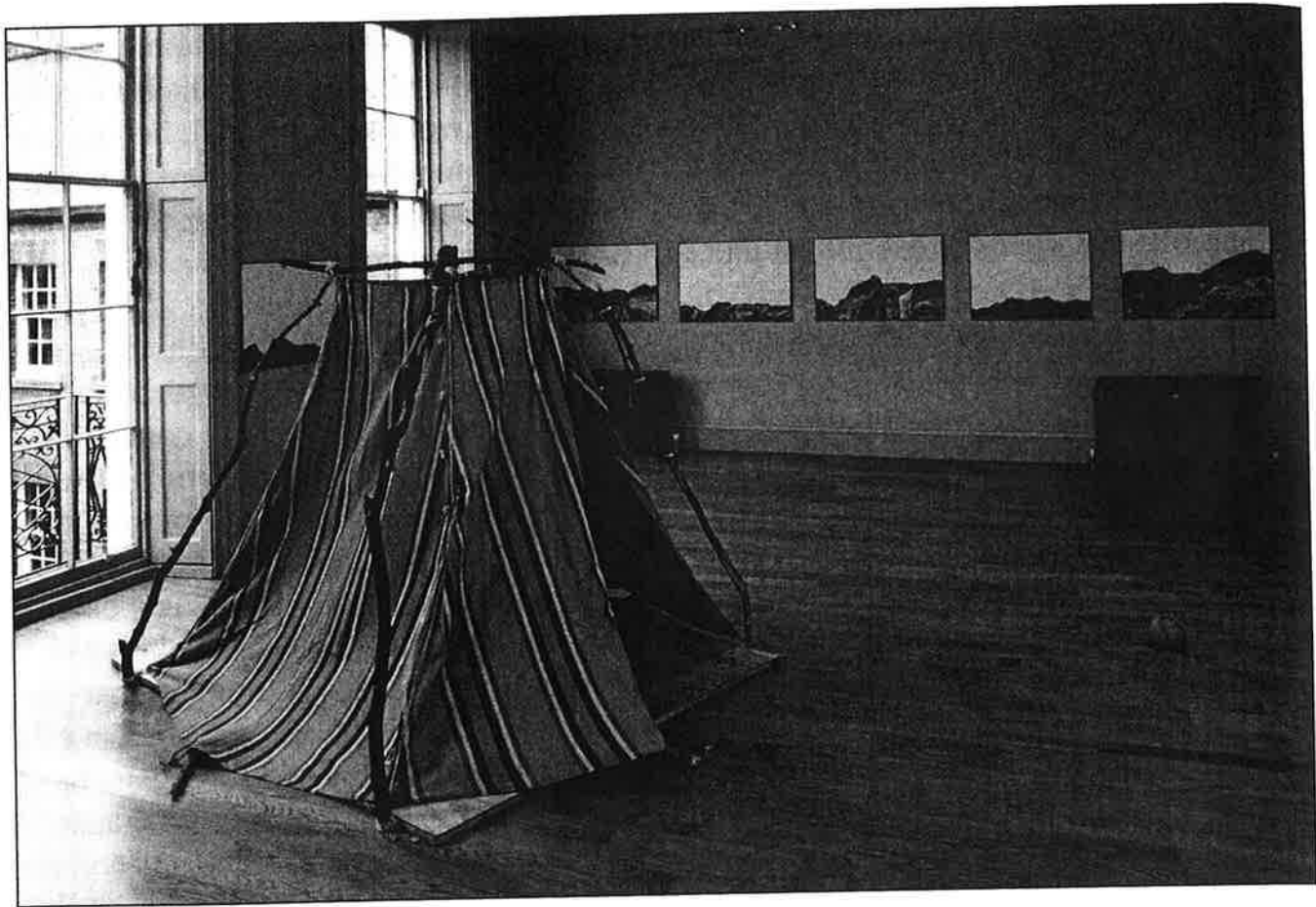


Figure 6. The work of Jan Peters (foreground) and Martina Schmid (far wall), *Ausland*, The Domo Baal Gallery, London, 2003. Photograph: The Domo Baal Gallery.

An imagined place as the site of critical writing was something I had theorized but not fully engaged with until I wrote 'Everywhere Else'.²⁶ This catalogue essay written for the group show *Ausland* develops my interest in imagining the spatial memories of others. Each of the three artists included in the exhibition engages with forms of architectural and spatial representation – Martina Schmid produces foreboding mountainous landscapes on folded paper from doodles scribbled while daydreaming, Silke Schatz draws large-scale architectural perspectives of places she remembers in fine-coloured pencil, while Jan Peters works in video presenting narratives of his experiences in labyrinthine buildings. I describe the sites materially present and those places I imagine the artists might have encountered and remembered in producing their work. The text is written as a detailed empirical account, moving between the artworks and the sites they refer to, as well as the location of the gallery itself.

Everywhere else

The cat's paw is large enough to cover the mountain crest; his tail is as long as the sunlit gully. But look more closely you can see that the mountain top is the edge of a dense cluster of loops drawn on a sheet of cartridge paper, folded many times. And the cat, having walked across the mountain range, has been sent on his way, relieved that his paw did not leave a mark on the paper.

Three figures sit cross-legged on the floor in a room whose function is unclear. Two windows frame views onto a London street and the door in the wall opposite opens onto a kitchen that stretches the width of the house. At the kitchen table a girl sits, her sulky head is bent over a book. Mounted on the wall behind her is a piece of cartridge paper, folded many times, covered in hundreds, thousands of tiny little loops, drawn in ink. Beside the drawing, on the mantelpiece is another drawing, smaller, this time perched rather than hung. This one is made of tiny lines drawn in pencil over a painted surface. A horizon line splits the canvas, creating on the mantelpiece, in the foreground, a smoother profile, more hilly than the rugged mountain range that lurks behind in the alcove.

As she draws, she daydreams, different voices weave in and out, stories on the television, conversations in the room. She is in a state of almost mindless concentration, at any moment her attention can wander. She slips to a summer meadow high up in the German countryside. Sitting there in the afternoon sunlight, just before the shadows of the surrounding mountain peaks fall across her lap. She wonders how she can feel a stranger in her own country. When the room comes into focus again, she is in another place. The paper on her lap is covered in many patches of tiny loops. How will they ever meet? When the joins are invisible, you can lose yourself in the middle; when the upper edge is neat, you can journey along the horizon.

The walls in this room look like they are covered in loops too – but up close it is possible to see that these are figures, lots and lots of small numbers. These are financial indices, specific quantities with particular functions, which appear here as surface ornament. In the opposite corner, two sofas are placed at right angles to one another. On the floor between them sit three women, a cat and one half of a pair of shoes. On one sofa art catalogues and CVs spill across the cushions. Behind the other sofa is a long box containing a large drawing, rolled up. This is a drawing of another room, by another hand, drawn from memory.

This is a room that matters, but that she was never quite part of. It was his room really, a room that he lived in before she entered his life, a room in which he may have loved others. To draw it is to conjure it into existence, to try to hold it down, to remember it as it was for her. The lines she draws are clear-headed and precise. She draws in a light, hard pencil, sometimes in graphite, sometimes in colour. She draws in perspective with the certainty of an architect. But the point of convergence never holds still. From where she is looking, the room shifts in her memory, her focus changes. Looking back into the past, there are many places where eyes might meet.

Between the two sofas, a second door leads out into the hallway, where an elegant staircase winds its way upstairs, to a room overlooking the garden. This room will soon contain one of her large perspective drawings. There is talk of a tent filled with her cushions to be placed in the centre of the room, where you can lie back and watch him talk of his journey.

He travels hard, day after day, moving through corridor after corridor, to try and understand the geometry of the place. But no one on the inside will tell him where he is. If he doesn't know where he is, how will he know who he is? So he draws himself a map on the palm of his hand to remind him of where he has been, to remind him that 'he is in the house'.

She too has been on many journeys, back from where she has come. Sometimes she uses the folded paper as a diary, one square per day. To remember days and places, she makes marks, one after another, slowly filling up the paper. Sometimes she records a now distant journey, marking all the squares at once, with no sense of sequence. If you fold and unfold the paper you can read one place next to, rather than before or after, another. In the patches of light and shadow she has made over time you can see the horizon of a mountain which you might have visited last summer.

In Hanover, this time, not London, three figures face a mirror. A man with wet hair is seated in the foreground bending his head downwards, only half his face is visible in the mirror. Behind him a woman leans forward with a pair of open scissors in her hand. She is cutting his hair. (Years down the line, cross-legged in the room full of numerical figures, we will see her profile again.) There is a third person, the face obscured by a camera, two hands adjust the lens; a photograph is taken. The photograph shows three artists, who today live somewhere else.

The light from the window hits her face in profile. She sits next to me on the floor, cross-legged. A third woman sits opposite, her back to a sofa. We talk of where we have come from. She was born in Russia, or was it Poland, or perhaps she said Australia? It is hard for me to remember her story, but it was also hard for her to tell. She comes from somewhere between fact and fiction. I tell them I was born in Dubai, but have moved from place to place so many times that London is my home, simply because it is not everywhere else.

My critical intention here has been to question the constitution of a legitimate subject or object for art criticism, and to expand the possibilities of criticism by suggesting that the critic can move beyond the works themselves to discuss the places imagined or remembered by the artists as well as the gallery or site of their economic exchange. The building in which the Domo Baal Gallery is located, a Georgian terraced house in Bloomsbury, London, is also the curator's home. As a critic you have access to the administration spaces or rooms 'supporting' the gallery and also to the private and domestic rooms of the house. Artworks can therefore be found in a number of different settings, exhibited in the gallery, stored under sofas, propped up on the kitchen mantelpiece, suggesting that as a critical spatial practice criticism needs to expand its si(gh)tes.

Notes

1. Julia Kristeva, 'Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: an interview', Alex Coles and Alexia Defert, eds., *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-*, v. 2, London: Black Dog Publishing, 1997, pp. 3–21.
2. See, for example, Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 25 and Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 2–3.
3. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 163.
4. Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Alicia Pivaro, Jane Rendell eds., *Strangely Familiar, Narratives of Architecture in the City*, London: Routledge, 1996.
5. In Michel de Certeau's discussion of practices, he uses the terms tactic and strategy. For de Certeau, strategies seek to create places that conform to abstract models; tactics do not obey the laws of places. See Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 29. For Henri Lefebvre, spatial practices, along with representations of space and spaces of representation, form a trialectical model where space is produced through three inter-related modes. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. It is possible to draw connections between de Certeau's strategies and Lefebvre's representations of space on the one hand, and de Certeau's tactics and Lefebvre's spaces of representation on the other and suggest a distinction between those practices (strategies) that operate to maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders, and those practices (tactics) that seek to critique and question them. I favour such a distinction and call the latter critical spatial practices, a term which serves to describe both everyday activities and art practices which seek to resist the dominant social order to global corporate capitalism.
6. Iain Borden, Jane Rendell, Joe Kerr with Alicia Pivaro eds., *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001.
7. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden eds., *Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London: Routledge, 1999 and Iain Borden and Jane Rendell, eds., *InterSections: Architectural History and Critical Theory*, London: Routledge, 2000.
8. The feminist text was Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market', *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (1977), (trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke), Ithaca: Cornell, 1985, pp. 170–91 and the urban narrative, Pierce Egan, *Life in London; or, the day and night scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq, and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*, London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1820–1. See Jane Rendell, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Gender, Space and Architecture in Regency London*, London and New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, Continuum and Rutgers University Press, 2002.
9. See Katherine Clarke of muf, 'How to: a description of what it takes to make a relationship to make a thing', in Jane Rendell ed., 'A Place Between', special issue of *The Public Art Journal*, issue 2, (October 1999), pp. 42–3 and Steve Pile, 'Between city and dream', in Jane Rendell (ed.) 'A Place Between', special issue of *The Public Art Journal*, issue 2, (October 1999), pp. 10–11.
10. Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

11. See Peg Rawes and Jane Rendell eds., *Spatial Imagination*, London: The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2005. See also spatialimagination.org.uk.
12. The conference was held in November 2005 at The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, organized by Jane Rendell and Jonathan Hill of the Bartlett, in association with AHRA (Architectural Humanities Research Association) represented by Murray Fraser of the University of Westminster and Mark Dorrian of the University of Edinburgh. The conference was part funded by the British Academy and part funded by The Bartlett School of Architecture. See Jane Rendell ed., 'Critical Architecture', special issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, (June 2005), v. 10. n. 3 and Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian eds., *Critical Architecture*, London: Routledge, forthcoming 2007.
13. See, for example, Alex Coles, 'The Bathroom Critic', *Art Monthly*, 263 (February 2003), pp. 7–10; Michael Archer, 'Crisis What Crisis?', *Art Monthly*, 264 (March 2003), pp. 1–4; Rasheed Araeen, letter in response to 'Crisis what Crisis', *Art Monthly*, 265 (April 2003), pp. 12–3; Matthew Arnat, 'The Middle Distance', response to Michael Archer, *Art Monthly*, 265 (April 2003), p. 43; Peter Suchin, 'The Critic never Sleeps', *Art Monthly*, 266 (May 2003), p. 41; Michael Archer, 'Critical Task', letter in response to 'The Critic never Sleeps', *Art Monthly*, 267 (June 2003), p. 9; Rasheed Araeen, 'Opportunism', letter in response to 'Critical Task', *Art Monthly*, 268 (Jul-Aug 2003), p. 14; J. J. Charlesworth, 'The Dysfunction of Criticism', *Art Monthly*, 269 (September 2003), pp. 1–4. The debate then turned to the role of the artist/curator, but has recently reverted to discussions of criticism in the form of artist Dave Beech's attack on critic Julian Stallabrass. See Dave Beech, 'Art's Debunkers', *Art Monthly*, 283 (February 2005), pp. 2–4. See also Jane Rendell, letter, 'Art Writing', *Art Monthly*, 272 (December-January 2003–4), p. 15.
14. See, for example, 'Architecture-Writing', in Jane Rendell ed., *Critical Architecture*, special issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, (June 2005), v. 10. n. 3, pp. 255–64. See also 'Travelling the Distance: Encountering the Other', David Blamey ed., *Here, There, Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, London: Open Editions, 2002, pp. 43–54; 'Writing in place of speaking', Sharon Kivland and Lesley Sanderson eds., *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, v. 1, Sheffield Hallam University and the Site Gallery, 2002, pp. 15–28; 'Site-Writing', Sharon Kivland, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Emma Cocker eds., *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, v. 4, Sheffield Hallam University and the Site Gallery, 2005, pp. 169–76; 'From Austin, Texas to Santiago Atitlan, and back again', Felipe Hernandez, Mark Millington and Iain Borden eds., *Architecture and Transculturation in Latin America*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi Press, 2006, pp. 43–58 and 'From Architectural History to Spatial Writing', in Elvan Altan Ergut, Dana Arnold and Belgin Turan Ozkaya eds., *Rethinking Architectural Historiography*, London: Routledge, 2006.
15. See, for example, Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; Diane Fuss, *Identification Papers*, London: Routledge, 1995; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994; Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, London: Routledge, 2000 and Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, London: Routledge, 1996.
16. See Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, p. 232; Donna Haraway. 'Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege

- of Partial Knowledge', *Feminist Studies*, v. 14, n. 3, (fall 1988), pp. 575–603, especially, pp. 583–8 and Elspeth Probyn, 'Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local' in Linda Nicholson ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 176–89, p. 178. See also Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 and bell hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, London: Turnaround Press, 1989.
17. Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 34 and pp. 64 and 79.
 18. See Hal Foster's discussion of critical distance and identification, for example, in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001, pp. 223–6.
 19. See Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*, London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. xi. See also Norman Bryson, 'Introduction: Art and Intersubjectivity', Mieke Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, Amsterdam: G+B International, 2001, pp. 1–39.
 20. See, for example, Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods), Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.
 21. See, for example, Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
 22. The significance Trinh T. Minh-ha assigns to the shift from speaking 'about' to speaking 'to' has been stressed by Irit Rogoff who underscores how, instead of taking power relationships to produce spatial locations, it is possible for a change in position to advance a change in relationship. See Irit Rogoff's discussion of Trinh T. Minh-ha's assertion in Irit Rogoff, 'Studying Visual Culture', in Nicholas Mirzoeff ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 14–26.
 23. See, for example, Italo Calvino, *Literature Machine*, London: Vintage, 1997, p. 15 and Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–80*, (trans. Linda Coverdale), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 215–6.
 24. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Lute Books, 1999 and Hélène Cixous. 'Sorties', (trans. Betsy Wing) from Susan Sellers ed., *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, London: Routledge, 1994.
 25. On art and site-specificity see, for example, Alex Coles ed., *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000; Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, London: Routledge, 2000; Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002.
 26. Jane Rendell, 'Everywhere Else', *Ausland*, comprising artists Jan Peters, Martina Schmid and Silke Schatz, (London: The Domo Baal Gallery, 2003).