

Section 2: Introduction

Jane Rendell

ARCHITECTURE-WRITING

The idea for the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference came from my own dissatisfaction with the current state of architectural criticism.ⁱ Whether in academic journals or publications connected with professional practice, very few critics seem willing to consider the purposes and possibilities of architectural criticism, or to reflect upon their choice of subject matter and modes of interpretation and operation. The level of self-reflectivity in architectural criticism lags behind architectural history and theory, and certain practices of architectural design. If one compares the level of intellectual debate concerning architectural criticism to discussions in other disciplines, namely art and literature, this sense of stagnation is reinforced.ⁱⁱ To date, in architecture, although there has been some exploration of the relation between criticism, history, and theory, there has been, to my knowledge, none of the relation between criticism and critical practice.ⁱⁱⁱ

Art criticism was a hot topic in the British art journal, *Art Monthly*, in 2003. Essays and letters debated the purpose and appropriate modes of art criticism in terms of ethics, aesthetics, and politics. One particular strand of the discussion focused on art-writing, providing inspiration for the ‘Architecture-Writing’ session of the ‘Critical Architecture’

conference.^{iv} When in April 2002, I was invited by Alex Coles to chair a session at a conference at Tate Britain called ‘The All New Art Writing’, I was keen to raise concerns that focused on space and subjectivity in contemporary art writing, asking critics to consider the positions they occupied not only in connection to art works but also in relation to writing itself. However, post conference, and in the pages of *Art Monthly*, the debate was constructed along adversarial lines, sticking to binary rather than discursive models: art writing rather than the non-expressive theoretical models of academic criticism, political critique rather than the formalism of art writing. My contribution was to say:

It is worth pointing out that the term art writing is not new, it has been around in so-called academic circles for some time now. Art writing is not about restating a case for formalism, but it does explore differing writing modes [...] the very form of the writing itself is taken to be integral to the way in which a critic positions him/herself. Feminist critics, such as Griselda Pollock, Mieke Bal, Rosalind Krauss and others, have been examining critical distance, questions of intimacy and the relationships critics construct with artists, art works and places for producing and viewing art. The personal and the autobiographical enter the debate, not in order to assert an ego criticism, but as part of an on-going political exploration of subjectivity.

(Jane Rendell, ‘Art Writing’, *Art Monthly*, 272, December 2003– January 2004, p.

15.)

The points I introduced at ‘The All New Art Writing’ conference are I think still pertinent to the current debate. They require that we look outside art journalism to other modes of writing in order to develop an art criticism that is self-reflective and creative as well as politically aware.

The possibilities opened up for criticism by art writing engage closely with debates around the relationship between theory and critical practice in the visual and spatial arts. But what happens when such ideas are taken into architectural criticism? Are such concepts and creative modes of production derived from elsewhere seen to be as relevant to architecture as those generated within the discipline itself? At many points during the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference we returned to questions concerning disciplinary specificity and this particular line of enquiry runs through many of the papers in this collection. For some, interdisciplinary debate is a distraction: critical enquiry and architectural production are relevant only when they emerge out of architecture itself.^v For others, including myself, ‘travelling concepts’ are indispensable,^{vi} they allow us to challenge assumptions internal to disciplines and to re-think, in this instance, what architecture is, what it might be and how we might think, write and make buildings critically. This is not to ignore the particularity of the context in which architectural criticism is located – the architectural profession – but to return to it, having been transformed through ideas experienced elsewhere.

I choose ‘Architecture-Writing’ as a title for the theme of my conference strand and for this section of the book in reference to my research into art-writing. Interestingly Katja Grillner, who has also contributed a chapter to *Critical Architecture*, has linked these two words in

the opposite way, as: ‘Writing Architecture’.^{vii} What difference does it make if one word comes before another, or if a preposition, for example, ‘for’, ‘with’, ‘to’, is inserted between the two terms?^{viii} And what of the hyphen? This small line that brings architecture and writing into close proximity allows us to think of one in relation to the other, but it also creates a compound or hybrid form. I focus here on this seemingly insignificant point of conjunction, on such a tiny detail as the hyphen, to demonstrate the importance of the decisions we make in designing the position of words – writing constructs as well as reflects meaning.

To date, criticism has operated through the medium of writing, but there is no reason why it cannot take new forms – those of art, film, or even architecture. Each medium has an architectonics – a series of procedures for the material organisation, structure and construction of space. In writing we might think of the patterning of words on a page or the design of a page itself – its edges, boundaries, thresholds, surfaces, and the relation of one page to another – as the distribution of objects in space. So it is possible to consider criticism as a form of architecture, and it is also desirable, because in so doing, in thinking one in terms of another, we are able to see more clearly what the differences between the two might be, and what is at stake in the binary and often hierarchical definition of those differences. Literary critic, Mary Ann Caws, makes use of the term ‘architexture’, and it is one which I think describes beautifully one possibility for architecture-writing:

The use of the term ‘architexture’ is meant quite simply to call attention to the surface texture of the construction made by reading. As architecture involves

etymologically both the concept of origin and that of the building process, architecture would involve both construction and material texture, would concentrate upon their interplay. As architecture situates the text in the world of other texts. The architecture of a particular work refers to the structure of the connecting passage, bridge, or corridor between elements as it relates to the material of the text or to that stretching between two texts [...]

(Mary Ann Caws, *A Metapoetics of the Passage: Architectures in Surrealism and After*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1981, p. xiv.)

Here, in *Critical Architecture*, the first three chapters explore respectively the place of writing, theory and criticism as forms of critical practice, as what we might call practice-led or -based research. While Rolf Hughes discusses the prose poem as a hybrid genre that combines critical and creative writing practices, in relation to her own work as an artist, Laura Ruggeri explores the potential of metaphor as a place of spatial transformation, rather than a solely literary or semiotic device. And choosing active criticism over critical action, Paul Shephard sets out his own proposition for architectural criticism: ‘to write about material action by being embedded in it’.

The next three chapters turn to film and photography, as not only subjects, but also modes of architectural criticism. In ‘Film as Spatial Critique’, film-maker Patrick Keiller suggests that ‘film space can offer an implicit critique of actual space’, and that researching as well as making films can act as a form of architectural criticism. Igea Troiani considers the potential of the documentary as a filmic genre for developing architectural criticism, one

utilised in her own practice as an architectural historian involved in the production of films. By emphasising the importance of conversation as a research tool, the documentary, Troiani argues, places emphasis on the role of collaboration in architectural design. Robin Wilson explores the work of art-architecture collaborative, Warren and Mosely, in order to examine how the architectural photograph plays a critical role in architectural journalism.

Finally, the last three chapters in the section explore the role of memory and writing in relation to architectural criticism. Katja Grillner takes up Walter Benjamin's comments on the experience of architecture as one of distraction not concentration, and proceeds to demonstrate, by journeying through Hage Park in Stockholm, distracted by her childhood memories, how architectural criticism can operate 'out-of-focus'. Artist Sharon Kivland also examines the role of memory in the rewriting of place in relation to two of her art works 'Memoirs' and 'Cela aura déjà eu lieu' ('It will have happened already'). In her chapter, she explores memory in relation to the psychoanalytic terms repetition, resistance, recollection and reminiscence. Finally, also drawing on themes of repetition and reminiscence, my own chapter reworks a series of childhood memories of spaces, following the trajectory of a specific piece of writing from criticism, where the memories evoked provided a critique of another work, to a work composed of two scenes of writing, one in a window, the other in a book. We might conclude here, with Virginia Wolff, that the writing of a memory is the making of a scene:

These scenes, by the way, are not altogether a literary device – a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable little threads. Innumerable threads there

were; still, if I stopped to disentangle, I could collect a number. But whatever the reason may be, I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged, representative. This confirms me in my instinctive notion – it is irrational; it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort; the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene – for they would not survive entire so many ruinous years unless they were made of something permanent; that is a proof of their ‘reality’.

(Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, edited with an introduction and notes by Jeanne Schulkind, London: The Hogarth Press, 1985, p. 142.)

The nine chapters in ‘Architecture-Writing’ suggest that the objects and subjects, as well as the practices of architectural criticism, may come from beyond architecture and might include art, film, writing and philosophy. ‘Architecture-Writing’ expects that in order to reflect upon the specificity of our own modes of operation as architectural critics, we draw on knowledge gleaned both from within architecture but also from beyond it, recognizing that the new understandings produced have relevance both to architecture but also to other subjects and disciplines. Finally, if we consider the modes in which we practice criticism to define and produce critical positions, then the ‘architectonics’ of criticism – the structure, processes and materials of the media employed – should be considered integral to the construction of architectural criticism. ‘Architecture-Writing’ shows that criticism is itself a material practice, which focuses on the interrogation and configuration of the changing relationship between a critic, architecture, and writing.

i For a summary of the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference content see
<<http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/architecture/events/conferences/conferences.html>>

ii See for example, Gavin Butt (ed.) *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

iii See Kate Nesbitt (ed.) *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965–1995*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p. 16, and Michael K. Hays (ed.) *Architecture Theory since 1968*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000, p. v. See also Neil Leach (ed.) *Rethinking Architecture*, London: Routledge, 1997; Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds) *InterSections: Architectural History and Critical Theory*, London, Routledge, 2000.

iv See Alex Coles, ‘The Bathroom Critic’, *Art Monthly*, 263, February 2003, pp. 7–10; Michael Archer, ‘Crisis what Crisis?’, *Art Monthly*, March 2003, 264, pp. 1–4; Rasheed Araeen, letter in response to ‘Crisis what Crisis?’, *Art Monthly*, April 2003, 265, pp. 12–3; Matthew Arnat, ‘The Middle Distance’, response to Michael Archer, *Art Monthly*, April 2003, 265, p. 43; Peter Suchin, ‘The Critic never Sleeps’, *Art Monthly*, May 2003, 266, p. 41; Michael Archer, ‘Critical Task’, letter in response to ‘The Critic never Sleeps’, *Art Monthly*, June 2003, 267, p. 9; Rasheed Araeen, ‘Opportunism’, letter in response to ‘Critical Task’, *Art Monthly*, July–August 2003, 268, p. 14; and J. J. Charlesworth, ‘The Dysfunction of Criticism’, *Art Monthly*, September 2003, 269, 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 Stalleybrass. See Dave Beech, ‘Art’s Debunkers’, *Art Monthly*, February 2005, 283, pp. 2–4. See also Sarah James, ‘The Ethics of Aesthetics’, *Art Monthly*, March 2005, no. 284, pp. 7–10.

v A variation on this position is the one that argues that architecture is itself interdisciplinary and so has no need to engage with other disciplines. For an expanded discussion of many of these issues see Jane Rendell, ‘Architectural Research and Disciplinarity’, *ARQ (Architecture Research Quarterly)*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2004, pp. 141–7.

vi For an extended discussion, see Jane Rendell, ‘Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other’, David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There, Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, London: Open Editions, 2002, pp. 43–54, ; and Jane Rendell, ‘Writing in Place of Speaking’, Sharon Kivland and Lesley Sanderson (eds), *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, vol. 1, Sheffield Hallam University and Site Gallery, 2002, pp. 15–29.

vii See <<http://www.akad.se/progwri.htm>> (AKAD: The Academy for Practice-based Research in Architecture and Design) in particular the workshops: 'Writing Architecture' (June 2004 to January 2005, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm). See also Katja Grillner 'The Halt at the Door of the Boot-Shop', in Katja Grillner, et al. (eds), *01.AKAD*, Stockholm: 2005; and Katja Grillner, 'Writing and Landscape – Setting Scenes for Critical Reflection', in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Opposites Attract: Research by Design* a special issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 8, no. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 239–49. See also the chapter by Rolf Hughes in *Critical Architecture*; and Rolf Hughes, 'The Poetics of Practice-Based Research', in Hilde Heynen (ed.), *Unthinkable Doctorates?*, a special issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2006, pp. 283–301.

viii The role of the preposition is a personal fascination. For me, prepositions indicate the importance of 'position' and 'relation' in the spatial encounter between the critic and the art or architectural work. Michel Serres, for example, writes of the angelic qualities of prepositions in terms of their role as messengers and their transformational qualities. See Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, Paris: Flammarion Press, 1995, pp. 140–7.