

Confessional Constructions

At the BookArtBookShop in London, on the corner of Charles Street and Pitfield Street, Brigid McLeer is the curator of LLAW on one of the outside walls. She commissioned from me a 'page' that would be pasted to the wall for a month. Brigid's interest was in the physical construction of the text and with the ways in which I might explore my position within the space of writing. How would the public placing of the 'page' on the wall, for example, influence what and how I might write? Italo Calvino has discussed the places writers occupy in relation to their writing in terms of their different identities as subjects or 'I's:

And in these operations the person 'I', whether explicit or implicit, splits into a number of different figures: into an 'I' who is writing and an 'I' who is written, into an empirical 'I' who looks over the shoulder of the 'I' who is writing and into a mythical 'I' who serves as a model for the 'I' who is written. The 'I' of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process.¹

Through discussions with Brigid, a new way of working emerged, that changed the ways I would normally have considered the layout of the text on the page and my place within it. A main statement - an autobiographical detail, perhaps a confessional - was interwoven with more critical reflections upon what it means to confess. I placed the footnotes down the side of the page, numbered from bottom to top, to read upwards as one builds a wall. These contained the architectural specifications by an architect friend, Deborah Millar, concerning the detailing of walls and openings. These careful instructions for physically constructing the boundary between inside and outside touched upon my own developing interests in the confessional as a constructing rather than a revealing of the self.

In a collection of critical essays, A S Byatt examines her fascination with 'topological fictions', fictions where the term topological means 'both mathematical game-playing, and narratives constructed with spatial rather with temporal images'.² Byatt names certain works by Primo Levi, Italo Calvino and George Perec as the most interesting examples of this kind of writing.³ For me, these authors have different ways of making topological fictions, or, spatial writing. While Calvino often uses combination and permutation as strategies for constructing the shape of stories, Perec's playfulness in the ordering of observations and descriptions of existing places produces new imaginative spaces. In discussing his own interest in 'topological fictions', Calvino refers to a review by Hans Magnus Enzensberger of labyrinthine narratives in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Robbe Grillet. Here Enzensberger describes how, by placing narratives inside one another, these authors make places where it is easy to get lost.⁴

In reading out my 'confessional construction', pasted to the wall of the BookArtBookShop, as one would read a page – from left to right, from top to bottom – I transformed my relation to the page and its contents. This creates,, by accident it seems, a series of walls or perhaps 'blockages', that only my voice can carry you through.

Confessional Construction

In 1989, on the way from Austin, Texas

FACEWORK:

Protect against damage and disfigurement, particularly arises of openings and corners.

¹ Italo Calvino. 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', *The Literature Machine* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.15.

² A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 139-41.

³ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (London: Penguin Books, 2000); George Perec, *Life: A User's Manual* (London: Collins Harvell, 1992); Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (London: Vintage Classics, 1998).

⁴ H. M. Enzensberger, 'Topological Structures in Modern Literature', (May-June 1966), *Sur*.

I've always considered autobiographical writing to be confessional, part of a process of revelation, one that uncovers the truth beneath. But recently

14

to Tikal, Guatemala, I met a Chicano

BASIC WORKMANSHIP:

Store bricks/blocks in stable stacks clear of the ground. Protect from inclement weather and keep clean and dry.

I've come to realise that a confessing is not a revealing, but a constructing (of ourselves). 2 Writing about myself is a making of myself. 3 Although

13

artist, who gave me a book, *The*

POLYETHYLENE DAMP PROOF COURSE

Joint sheets with continuous strips of mastic between 150mm overlaps and seal with tape along the edge of the upper sheet, leaving no gaps. Ensure that sheets are clean and dry at the time of jointing.

the writing professes, confesses, to be a window or an opening to an

If sheets cannot be kept dry, double welted joints may be used, taped to hold in position prior to laying concrete.

interior, 4 it might better be described as a mask, 5 or a wall, 6 a boundary

12

Passionate Nomad. The book was the

Lay neatly and tuck well in angles to prevent bridging. Form folded welts at corners in upstands.

between myself and another.7 As such it is a form of psychic architecture.

11

diary of Isabelle Eberhardt, a young

SECOND HAND LONDON STOCK FACING BRICKWORK

Bricks: Second hand London Stock bricks, to match existing, free from deleterious matter such as mortar, plaster, paint, bituminous materials and organic growths. Bricks to be sound, clean and reasonably free from cracks and chipped arisses.

Some bricks can be salvaged from demolitions C10/5-7. As far as possible these should be re-used for making good reveals to same, in order to achieve best possible colour match.

Sometimes I draw others into my stories – my father, my mother, even my lover.8 sometimes it is without their consent. 9 They are an integral part of

10

ALTERATIONS/EXTENSIONS

Except where a straight vertical joint is specified, new existing facework in the same plane to be tooth bonded together at every course to give continuous appearance.

woman from an affluent French family

Where new lintels or walling are to support existing structure, completely fill top joint with semidry mortar, hard packed and well rammed to ensure full load transfer after removal of temporary supports.

my confessional construction. 10 If they are the building materials, then who is

9

the architect? 1

ALTERATIONS/EXTENSIONS

Arrange brick courses to line up with existing work.

Brick to brick: 4 courses high at 8 course centres.

Brick to block, block to brick or block to block: Every

who spent the later part of her short

alternate block course.

Bond new walling into pockets with all voids filled solid.

8

My love of writing is generated through a desire for encounters. I often tell stories about myself to make a place to meet my reader.

FIRE STOPPING:

Fill joints around joist ends built into cavity walls with mortar to seal cavities from interior of building.

Ensure a tight fit between brickwork and cavity barriers to prevent fire and smoke penetration.

Life disguised as an Arab man wander-

7

In telling you about myself, I reveal aspects of myself, make myself vulnerable. 11 But am I really revealing?

FACEWORK:

Keep courses evenly spaced using gauge rods/ set out carefully to ensure satisfactory junctions and joints with adjoining or built-in elements or components.

ing the North African deserts. She died

6

Is it not that I am showing you my vulnerability, showing you who I am? 12

FACEWORK:

Select bricks/blocks with unchipped arrises. Cut with a masonry saw where cut edges will be exposed to view.

5

aged 28, on 20.10.1904 in a flash flood at

TIMBER WINDOWS:

To BS 644: Part 1

Manufactured by a firm currently registered under the British Woodworking Federation Accreditation Scheme.

Materials generally: To BS EN 942.

Are my stories walls or windows? 13

When no predrilled or specified otherwise, position fixings no more than 150 mm from each end of jamb, adjacent to each hanging point of opening lights and at maximum 450mm centres.

4

Ain-Sefra. Her diary is one of my

BASIC WORKMANSHIP:

Bring both leaves of cavity walls to the same level at

- Every course containing rigid ties.
- Every third tie course for double triangle/butterfly ties.
- Courses in which lintels are to be bedded.

*What does psycho-analysis say about boundaries? * What do walls say about*

Do not carry up any one leaf more than 1.5m in one day unless permitted by the CA.

self-protection?

3

favourite books. I too have had addic-

BASIC WORKMANSHIP:

Build walls in stretching half lap bond when not specified otherwise.

Lay bricks/blocks on a full bed of mortar; do not furrow. Fill all cross joints and collar joints:
do not tip and tall.

Rack back when raising quoins and other advance work. Do not use toothing.

Are architectural and psychic elements, processes and structures analogous? 14

2

tive relationships with food and travel.

All specifications from Deborah Millar, architect.

The book is Isabelle Eberhardt, *The Passionate Nomad: the Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1988).

* On the corner of Charles Street and Pitfield Street, she found a bookshop, one that she had not noticed before. She walked in. On the left-hand wall, lying on the floor, quite close to the wall, she saw a book. When she bent down to pick it up, she saw it was a copy of Sigmund Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis*, (London: Penguin Books, 1986). She turned to page 11. Crouching there, close to the floor, head almost touching the wall, she started to read: 'Our hypothesis . . .' She read for 41 seconds.

For associated publications: see Jane Rendell, 'Between Two: Theory and Practice', Journal of Architecture, v. 8, (Summer 2003); Jane Rendell, 'From Architectural History to Spatial Writing', in Elvan Altan Ergut, Dana Arnold, Belgin Turan Ozkaya, (eds.), Rethinking Architectural Historiography, (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2006); Jane Rendell, 'Architectural History as Critical Practice', in Hilde Heynen and Jean-Louis Genard (eds.), Critical Tools: International Colloquium on Architecture and Cities, no. 3, (Bruxelles, La Lettre Volée, forthcoming 2006); Jane Rendell, 'Taking Place, but only for so long', Doina Petrescu (ed.) Altering Practices, (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2006).