

the place of prepositions: a space inhabited by angels.

jane rendell with pamela wells

[the following short excerpts are taken from Jane Rendell with Pamela Wells, 'The Place of Prepositions: a place inhabited by angels', Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Architecture: The Subject is Matter*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

a conversation beyond us: from london to wolverhampton, between theory and practice

jane rendell: what do you think your work is about?

pamela wells: creating temporary architectures. of a sort.

making places for things to happen.

hallways, door, stairwells. passages.

why do you make these places?

less about the mastery of technique,

they are more thresholds of discovery.

spaces that we can move through;

gathering and unravelling.

how do you position yourself in relation to your work? where are you in that space - conceptually and materially?

where am i? who am i? where am i going?

we need to make spaces to ask these questions,

pliable spaces to lose yourself. . .

giving yourself away in order to reconvene.

so how are others involved in making that space?

we help one another navigate.

space, as an architectural concept is nothing if not a relationship.

it's easier, for me, to orientate in a crowded room, bumping into others.

people help me - physically and conceptually - to create these places.

i find parts of myself that i didn't know about

they find something of me

and they may take it with them.

we lose ourselves by connecting with others

the architectures you create have a very particular materiality. why do you like working with plastic for example?

i work with ordinary materials that have their own narrative potential.

like plastic carrier bags.

an overlooked by-product, discarded after use.

(the woman in the kitchen after shopping.)

plastic protects, but things stored in plastic go off quickly.

a suffocating potential . . .

*breathing, semi-permeable, like skin.
translucent and opaque,
it contains and yet has no fixed form.*

what's the story with beads and stitching?
*loose, we can't grasp them
strung together they are precious.
on their own, they are unnecessary,
stitched on top of plastic they are transformative.
just like words.
words we don't usually pay attention to.
like prepositions.*

intersubjectivity: between theory and practice

in general, women are much more interested in others. this can be seen, for example, in the use of transitive verbs with the person as the animate object - 'je le lave' [i wash him], m'aimes-tu?' [do you love me?] - or of prepositions expressing intersubjectivity; avec [with], entre [between, amongst], a [to], pour [for], etc.[...].¹

there is something appealing in the challenge of creating 'spectacular' work without falling into the trap of the commodifiable spectacle. i have found interaction and collaborative making to be effective strategies for disrupting fetishistic, purely objective relationships (between maker and consumer, between thing and use, between monument and audience). i straddle the lines between social sculpture, community animation, personal vision and public art.

there appear to be parallels between two bodies of feminist work produced in the 1970's. on the one hand, there are the theoretical and philosophical enquiries of french feminists around feminine desire, morphology and space. the insights of luce irigaray and hélène cixous—notions of écriture féminine and économies féminine—suggest modes of writing, new forms of creativity.² they also suggest new ways of making relationships between one another, ones which differ from the masculine—differ from an economy of appropriation and the self-same, where more is better and the other is only regarded in relation to the self. for me, french feminist critical theory provides an emancipatory impulse, an opportunity for self reflection and a chance to imagine new places between men and women.

references

¹ luce irigaray, *thinking the difference*, london: the athlone press, 1994, pp. 48-9.

² see for example elaine marks and irene de courtivron, *new french feminisms: an anthology*, london: harvester wheatsheaf, 1981, and alice a. jardine and anne m. menke (eds.) *shifting scenes, interviews on women, writing, and politics in post-68 france*, new york: colombia press, 1991.

on the other, we have the work of radical feminist artists in the U.S., such as judy chicago, cheri gaulke, mary kelly, miriam shapiro and others, exploring female sexuality, the body and desire.³ these artists also developed an interest in techniques, materials and processes traditionally connected with women's work—such as sewing and interaction. the u.s. has also produced a wealth of overtly feminist artists who deal specifically with public space such as suzanne lacy andkim abeles, as well as critics attentive to issues of gender and place such as suzi gablik, dolores hayden, lucy lippard and arlene raven.⁴ educated in los angeles, pamela wells comes out of this rich seam of work so relevant to today's more theoretical discussions of feminine topographies and figurations in architecture.

both influences have been treated with scepticism by many british feminists. in different ways they are too 'messy', too sexual and, for marxist feminists, they run the risk of essentialising and dehistoricising the difference between men and women. the resonance of french feminist theory in architectural discourse in the U.K. is only just being felt, having found its way through feminist art history and geography, as well as through less squeamish feminist architectural critics in the U.S.⁵ the legacy of the U.S. based radical feminist art practice, can be seen in the work of someone as unlikely as tracey emin. although she does not overtly associate herself with feminist issues, her focus on her personal life and her choice of technique, such as stitching and quilting, connect her to the history of feminist practice.

this essay is written in between two places—between feminist critical theory and feminist critical art practice. pamela wells' art practice and jane rendell's theoretical writings have developed apart. here, these two subjects speak in between. but what allows a mediation of this space between two: between words and things, ideas and matter, makers and users, jane and pamela? what we aim to do here is jostle back and forth (in between) in order to negotiate the relation that theory has to practice. never an easy task. we are not interested in using examples of practice to illustrate theoretical positions, nor in applying theoretical insights to modes of practice, but rather to create another space where a new relationship between the two may come into being. remaining on the cusp, the threshold between the two, it is possible to be attentive to

3 see for example witney chadwick's account of various feminist art projects in whitney chadwick, *women, art, and society*, london: thames and hudson, 1996, chapter 12.

4 see for example, suzi gablik, *the reenchantment of art*, new york: thames and hudson, 1991, dolores hayden, *the power of place*, london: mit press, 1995, and suzanne lacy (ed.), *mapping the terrain: new genre public art*, seattle: bay press, 1995.

5 see for example the work of tamar garb in art history and gillian rose in geography, as well as jennifer bloomer and vanessa chase in architecture. see tamar garb, 'unpicking the seams of her disguise—self-representation in the case of marie bashkirtseff', *block*, august 1987-8, no. 13, pp. 79-85, gillian rose, *feminism and geography: the limits of geographical knowledge*, cambridge: polity press, 1993, and jennifer bloomer, *architecture and the text: the (s)cripts of joyce and piranesi*, new haven: yale university press, 1993.

the concerns of both. what follows are sets of threes, one thing and then another, and then a negotiation between the two. these speaking subjects, speak in threes.

both/and: between one and one is three

deconstruction as a process is profoundly creative ... deconstruction, then, is a process that can never stop or cease: it is profoundly resistant to closure. it works like a critical utopia ... in particular it creates new conceptual exploratory spaces by resisting dualistic thought, thereby undermining the structure or system through which meaning is created. ⁶

in contemporary critical theory there are at least two ways of dealing with twos. dialectics, the language of 'on the one hand ... yet on the other', the art of clarifying ideas through the exchange of questions and answers. another way of understanding this relationship is through deconstruction, the language of 'both/and'. there has been a great deal of debate as to whether deconstruction expresses any kind of political possibility, especially for feminism, given the place of the 'feminine' in derrida's writings. but here i follow diane elan, in positing that deconstruction provides a place of radical undecidability and that this position is a politicised one.⁷ lucy sargisson argues for a similarity between deconstruction and utopianism in that they both go further than reversing binary oppositions, but rather 'subverts and undermines the system which constructs those hierarchical relations'.⁸ the work of luce irigaray and hélène cixous can be understood within this context. in their writing one witnesses a glimpse of something new, the traits of a feminine economy—a willingness to take risks, to let go, to allow transformation.

prepositions: transformational messengers

préposer: to put someone in a position to carry out a function by giving them the means or the autonomy to do it ... that's prepositions for you. they don't change in themselves, but they change everything around them: words, things and people ... prepositions transform words and syntax, while pré-posés transform men.⁹

the figure of transformation is the angel. within angelology, an angel is 'a spirit or heavenly being who mediates between the human and divine realms', but the basic meaning of the term is messenger. the angel appears in philosophical texts as diverse as irigaray and walter benjamin, but it is within the work of michel serres' that the angel takes central stage. serres' intellectual project is enormous and wide ranging. truly interdisciplinary, he travels across science, literature, philosophy and art, constantly interrogating, in the most poetic fashion, the nature of knowledge itself. in earlier texts serres' interest in angels was more implicit—through figures of the guide and the messenger. in the *hermes* texts the fascination is with information theory, transport and the multiplication of messages through diverse spaces of communication.

⁶ lucy sargisson, *contemporary feminist utopianism*, london: routledge, 1996, p. 105.

⁷ diane elan, *feminism and deconstruction*, london: routledge, 1999.

⁸ sargisson, *contemporary*, p. 104.

⁹ michel serres, *angels: a modern myth*, paris: flammation, 1995, pp. 139-46.

later in *the troubadour of knowledge*, in a discussion of the passage between the exact sciences and sciences of man, serres refers to the importance of points of exchange and conditions of passage.¹⁰

in a more recent publication *angels: a modern myth*, a narrative of sorts set at an airport, angels appear through the conversations of the two main characters both involved with travel. serres' work highlights the angelic condition as a temporal and spatial one. his emphasis is on communication, mediation and transformation as a result of exchange. serres suggests that there are certain places where messages from angels increase in number and intensity, he calls these 'passing places of angels'—they are places of transition and passage, spaces of interchange, such as airports, places of mass transit, new technologies.¹¹ serres emphasises the unstable nature of angels, they are 'wandering with no fixed habitat',¹² and their dual role as verbal messengers and elemental fluxes: 'intermediary. angel. messenger. hyphen'.¹³ but perhaps the most interesting thing serres has to say about angels is that they are the personification of prepositions.

here we use the angelic properties of prepositions as a means of making connections between two, between people and places, between theory and practice. some prepositions emphasise position, the relation of an object or a subject to place, such as **on, in, between, through**. others focus on relationships between subjects and objects, for example, **among** and **with**, and the directional nature of these connections, like, **beyond, for** or **to**. yet others contain elements of time, as in beyond. we also suggest that art objects and processes can function like prepositions: they change everything around them. here we look at 9 sets of 3's: prepositions, and the theories/practices, concepts/objects they hyphenate. 9 is the number of change.

*it is the fluidity of **between**
where i lose my **on**,
the **in** of **to**.
then, seeking **with**,
the **among** of **for**,
we slip **through**
and reach **beyond**.*

[...]

(ii) in: lair

*white chocolate, melted and formed into walls,
into windows. coloured orange, green, light blue.
a pink, leg-like pedestal topped with fake grass.
there are no divisions in the space inside.*

¹⁰ michel serres, *hermes: literature, science, philosophy*, baltimore and london: the john hopkins press, 1982, and michel serres, *the troubadour of knowledge*, ann arbor: university of michigan press, 1997.

¹¹ serres, *angels*, p. 216.

¹² serres, *angels*, p. 12.

it bulges slightly.

it lasts longer than you might expect.

a miniature chandelier glows, hanging from the pitched roof,

illuminating the singular space.

in: the question of place

women are more attentive to the question of place: they are close to things, to others (autres, which is related to one of the indo-european roots of the verb *etre* [to be]).¹⁴

in: a critical dwelling space

recent work in feminism, cultural studies and human geography, has increasingly focused on issues of identity, difference and subjectivity. the language of these texts is highly spatialised, with words such as 'mapping', 'locating', 'situating', 'positioning' and 'boundaries' appearing frequently. academics might 'explain' this new emphasis on space as typical of postmodern discourse. (postmodernism in this context refers to a questioning of truth, history and the all-knowing modern subject and instead describes a series of discourses exploring new epistemologies and ontologies.)

these searches for new ways of knowing and being are being framed in spatial terms. for those concerned with issues of identity—race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity—spatial metaphors constitute powerful political devices which can be employed as critical tools for examining the relationship between the construction of identities and the politics of location. in such on-going theoretical disputes as the essentialism/constructionism debate, positionality provides a way of understanding knowledge and essence as contingent and strategic—*where* i am makes a difference to what i can know and who i can be.

the dwelling places for woman defined by men are problematic. in patriarchy, through ownership and appropriation, men have 'placed' women within male symbolic systems and constructed dwellings for themselves within their bodies. women are confined within walls which are closed, fixed and permanent—prisons. women do not own their own space but provide place for men—wombs. 'lair' is a sickly sweet smelling house made of pastel coloured chocolate sitting on a table topped with astro turf.

the viewing condition is made uncomfortable when you realise that the height of the turf corresponds to the height of the artist's pubic hair. inviting yet claustrophobic, a hiding place but also a trap, 'lair' creates a critical space for the mind to wander in. the house occupies a space corresponding to the cavity in the artist's body containing her guts and womb. the viewer finds that she is peering into herself.

[...]

a conversation between us: from wolverhampton to london, beyond practice and theory

¹³ serres, *angels*, p. 6.

¹⁴ irigaray, *thinking the difference*, pp. 48-9.

so how does what you've been saying relate to the rest of this book?

it means redefining architecture through other disciplines and practices. for example, the conceptual space of theory, the 'non-functionally-determined' space of art practice, the choreography of relationships between people that many feminists are interested in.

and what does my work have to do with this?

i think that there are inspirational moments in your work that place a different emphasis on the making of architecture, for example valuing the space of relationships made between people, over the building as a object-like thing.

how exactly?

if critical theory is a critique of capitalism, allowing an emancipatory moment, feminist critical theory suggests that you imagine the world from a different perspective, the perspective of the as-yet-unrealised female subject. many of the patterns within your working processes are analagous to irigaray's theoretical discourse concerning the shape of the female body. of course it is important to recognise that the use of a feminine morphology is strategic rather than literal. but to put this more directly, in your work you talk of the ways in which decorating plastic with beads transforms it into something precious. this can be used both as a feminine strategy that values the decorative, but it also to refocuses our attention architecturally on the relationship between materials. how can surface decoration transform the strata that lie beneath?

do you think this is a radical departure? i mean what would a practicing architect think of this? how could they relate it to their practice?

we should consider carefully what we mean by the term practice. first architectural practice is often seen as the making of perfect objects. but practicing is also about trying to get it right but often getting it wrong. second, practice intends to answer a set of aims. critical thinking questions the values of the aims themselves. finally, and most contentiously, i would argue that thinking is also a practice. it is something we do. we make ideas. unless we understand thinking as a form of practice, and practice as a thoughtful process it is impossible to transform the relationship between the two.

how does feminism relate to this discussion?

feminism makes it very clear that the relation of theory and practice depends on the particular – on history and geography -there are no universal rules. historically, it is only by acknowledging the work of earlier feminists that we can operate somewhat 'behind'. rather than having to work in reaction to dominant male models - either blending in by copying or by overtly attacking - we can adopt different strategies. we are able to be more listening, more empathetic. it is only in this state of mind that we more able to be ourselves and to open ourselves up to the other. to transform as well as transgress.

so what about geography?

the ability and desire to make connections with new things, depends on position. recent feminism makes a strong argument for understanding knowledge as situated – that we know things differently depending on where we are. first in one place then in another, we are both stationary and in motion. i think it is easier to make connections with another when in motion, when you are out of your place.

so these angels, do they really exist?

angels are hysterical. quite frankly, we wouldn't be able to have this conversation without them.

Pamela Wells is a visual artist exploring the boundaries between the ephemeral and the permanent, the virtual and the real. interested in socially engaged practice, her work questions notions of authorship and the siting of art. she is currently undertaking a residency at the city library and arts building in sunderland where she is working on a project called 'recipes for well-being' addressing the conceptual and physical flow of movement through this four-story multi-functional building, she is engaging with staff and visitors to create a sculptural book.

August 2000