My talk is entitled ‘Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism’ and suggests that writing is the site of building, design and thinking. I wish to draw attention to the architectural aspects of the practice of writing, a practice which, like architecture, is both spatial and material, and with which historians, theorists, critics and designers all engage, and yet is usually rendered invisible – often considered antithetical to designing, sometimes irrelevant to building. But most architects communicate their conceptual design ideas in words as well as images, and the legal documents of the building profession – contracts, specifications etc – occur as written texts as well as drawings. And most importantly it is through writing, as well as speaking, that thinking takes places. I would like to suggest today that writing, particularly the writing of art criticism is an architectural practice, in the sense that it involves the processes of thinking, designing and building – in short it can be understood as a spatial construction.

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With a background in architectural design, followed by research in architectural history, and then a period teaching public art, my writing has evolved through examinations of particular interdisciplinary meeting points – feminist theory and architectural history, conceptual art practice and architectural design, and most recently art criticism, psychoanalysis and autobiography. Although my aim remains constant – to articulate the position of the writing subject and her choice of objects of study and subject matters, processes of intellectual enquiry and creative production – over time my methods have transformed from writing a feminist marxist critique of the gendering of architectural space in nineteenth-century London in The Pursuit of Pleasure, to my current site-writing project where the boundary between subjects and objects is more porous and arguments are not only made directly, but indirectly, through association and implication.

Art and Architecture: A Place Between marked a transition, where, through the process of writing about critical spatial practice – a theorized account of a series of projects located between art and architecture – I realized that the changing positions I occupied in relation to art, architecture and theory – physical as well as ideological,
private as well as public – informed my critical attitude. I concluded *Art and Architecture* by arguing that criticism is *itself* a form of critical spatial practice.

My new book *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, picks up where *Art and Architecture* leaves off, shifting the focus from a place between art and architecture to the sites between critic and work. *Site-Writing* explores the position of the critic, not only in relation to art objects, architectural spaces and theoretical ideas, but also through the site of writing itself, investigating the limits of criticism, and asking what it is possible for a critic to say about an artist, a work, the site of a work and the critic herself and for the writing to still ‘count’ as criticism. While a number of critics have written about situated practice, including site-specific art, as well as the importance of location in feminist and postcolonial art, this book argues for produces art criticism as situated practice.

*Site-Writing* is composed of a series of texts developed over the last ten years, some newly authored, others radically transformed. The research is set with an inter-, or perhaps intra-, disciplinary framework that reinvigorates the concepts, processes and subjects of art criticism through the use of spatial terms – psychoanalytic concepts derived from Sigmund Freud, and developments of his work by André Green and Jean Laplanche and architectural conditions – thresholds, coverings, triads. *Site-Writing* is structured into five spatial configurations – the first, for example, is named a ‘Triangular Structure with Variable Thirds’ and looks at the architectural installations of Tracey Emin in relation to the Oedipal triangle and is written in three voices.

This essay is taken from the second configuration ‘Back and Forth’ which examines how repetition operates at the site of repression – on the threshold between conscious and unconscious. The threshold is transitional site, both in terms of architectural space – it is a site where inside is divided from outside, and also in terms of psychic space – it is a site where inner life is separated from the outer world. The essay is divided into three parts, I begin with ‘Situated Criticism’, a discussion which frames the practice of site-writing theoretically, I continue with ‘To Miss the Desert’, an essay which exemplifies site-writing, and end with ‘An Embellishment: Purdah’ where one site-writing transforms into two others – one in a window and one in a book – in response to a change in site.
Situated Criticism

Over the past twenty years feminism, postcolonial studies and human geography has increasingly focused on issues of identity, difference and subjectivity. With words such as ‘mapping’, ‘locating’, ‘situating’, ‘positioning’ and ‘boundaries’ appearing frequently, the language of these texts is highly spatialised. Discussions of new ways of knowing and being are articulated through spatial terms, developing conceptual and critical tools such as ‘situated knowledge’ and ‘standpoint theory’ for examining the relationship between the construction of subjects and the politics of location. The work of feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti exemplifies this attitude beautifully, for her the figure of the ‘nomadic subject’ describes not only a spatial state of movement, but also an epistemological condition, a kind of knowingness (or unknowingness) that refuses fixity.

Since minimalism, art, notably that which derives from feminism and postcolonialism, has developed a sophisticated understanding of how the viewer’s experience varies according to cultural identity and geographic location, and has an intimate as well as public dimension. Most recently what has been termed relational or dialogical art has focused on how the viewer’s interaction, participation and collaboration is central to the production of art’s aesthetic dimension. However, debates around the position of the critic as a specific kind of art viewer are only just beginning to be worked through.

In drawing attention to specific kinds of viewing subjects, art critic Claire Bishop describes the tension between the activated spectator who in engaging with the work is understood to politically interact with the world, and the decentred experience favoured by feminist and post-colonial artworks as a critique of dominance, privilege and mastery. Bishop suggests that it is the ‘degree of proximity between model subject and literal viewer’, which may ‘provide a criterion of aesthetic judgement for installation art’. Although she does refer in passing to the processes of writing criticism in terms of the implications of not experiencing the work first-hand, Bishop does not discuss the critic as a precise category of viewing subject. I suggest, however, that with his/her responsibility to ‘interpret’ and ‘perform’ the work for another audience, the critic occupies a discrete position as mediator between the artwork and Bishop’s viewing and model subjects.
For my part, the kind of writing that emerges from acknowledging the *situatedness* – the specific and situated position – of the critic plays a key role in determining the performance of the critic’s interpretative role. Yet as we shall now see the spatial aspect of the critic’s position as interpreter and performer of the work for others is not something that other critics have explicitly focused in terms of material placing, rather space is engaged with conceptually, often through the use of metaphor.

For example, when art critic Hal Foster discusses the need to rethink critical distance, he points to the different distances produced by the optical and the tactile, but warns of the dangers of both dis-identification and over-identification with the object of study.\(^{\text{xv}}\) Foster rejects those who lament the end of ‘true criticality’ as well as those who see critical distance as ‘instrumental mastery in disguise’. However, despite advocating the need to think through questions of critical distance, Foster still proposes that the critic’s role is to judge and make decisions without fully examining how these modes of operation are spatially conditioned.\(^{\text{xvi}}\)

Also drawing attention to critical distance, but in response to literary works, Isobel Armstrong has closely examined the differences between close and distant reading. Armstrong distinguishes between a criticism of affect and one of analysis, but rejects the tendency to use a binary model to divide feeling and thought. Instead, Armstrong calls for affect to be included within rational analysis.\(^{\text{xvii}}\) Using highly spatialised language, Armstrong argues that it is the feeling/thought binary which itself installs a form of critique where the subject is located in a position of power ‘over’ the text as other, producing a form of distant, rather than close reading. She states that this form of reading rests upon an account of the text as ‘outside, something external which has to be grasped – or warded off’.\(^{\text{xviii}}\)

Howard Caygill’s study of the writings of Walter Benjamin presents a view of criticism that mobilizes spatial terms such as ‘external’ to examine how discriminations and judgements may be both partial and performed. Following his own reading of philosopher Immanuel Kant, Caygill asserts that: ‘It is axiomatic for immanent critique that the criteria of critical judgement be discovered or invented in the course of criticism’.\(^{\text{xix}}\) For Caygill, ‘strategic critique shares with immanent critique the refusal to judge work according to given criteria’ but rather to ‘make discriminations while deferring judgement’.\(^{\text{xx}}\)
Caygill maintains that there is ‘no position outside the work from which the critic may judge it’ rather a critic ‘must find moments of externality within the work – those moments where the work exceeds itself, where it abuts on experience’. xxix

Strategic critique moves between the work and its own externality, situating the work in the context of experience, and being in its turn situated by it. xxi

Although this is not something explicitly discussed by Caygill, these moments for making discriminate judgements are intrinsically spatial.

In the introduction to his edited collection of essays After Criticism, Gavin Butt argues for something very similar. xxiv Following Jacques Derrida’s oft-quoted remark that ‘there is no outside to the text’, Butt claims that since there is no ‘anterior vantage point set apart from criticism’s object from which the task of critique could be launched’ the postmodernist critic is ‘always already imbricated in the warp and weft of the cultural text’. xxv Butt ‘calls for the recognition of an “immanent” rather than a transcendent, mode of contemporary criticality’ which, following the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is ‘apprehended within – and instanced as – the performative act of critical engagement itself’. xxv

Critics from feminist and performance studies have also expressed an interest in the performative qualities of criticism. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, for example, take issue with the tradition that the interpreter must be neutral or disinterested in the objects, which s/he judges, and posit instead, with reference to spatial mobility, that the process of viewing and interpreting involves ‘entanglement in intersubjective spaces of desire, projection and identification’:

Interpretation, like the production of works of art, is a mode of communication. Meaning is a process of engagement and never dwells in any one place. xxvi

In a recent edited volume, The State of Art Criticism, where a wide range of critics interrogate such questions of judgment and distance, Michael Schreyach’s argues that we have reached a position where self-reflective criticism is the norm and, making use
of the spatial and visual term ‘frame’, he suggests that critics are able to recognize and acknowledge the frame in which they write.

However, in Schreyach’s opinion, since ‘admitting ones own preferences and investments is self-exposure not self-criticism’, this frame is one of which critics are only ‘partially conscious’. xxvii His stance is that the task of criticism should be to set up an equivalence with an artwork, which does more than simply ‘mirror its object’, xxviii and instead converts the first experience, the authentic or original experience of an encounter with an artwork, into one with a value for other perspectives. Schreyach holds that one of the key criteria for judging the success of such criticism is derived from how the critic communicates his/her encounter with the work to the reader and ‘handles the vertiginous shifts in perspective (authorial, historical, social) afforded by the indeterminacies of writing’. xxix

These commentaries on the operations of criticism make use of spatial terms, such as distance, frame, externality and outside, to explore conceptual issues governing the relation between critic and artwork.

As stressed by cultural critic Irit Rogoff, artist and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha has drawn attention to the significance assigned to the shift in use of prepositions, particularly from speaking ‘about’ to speaking ‘to’. xxx Following Minh-ha, Rogoff underscores how, by ‘claiming and retelling narratives (“speaking to”), we alter the very structures by which we organize and inhabit culture’. xxxi Adopting the preposition ‘with’ rather than ‘to’, Rogoff discusses how the practice of ‘writing with’ is a ‘dehierarchization’ of the social relations governing the making of meaning in visual culture. xxxii

I have also explored the use of prepositions, especially ‘to’, xxxiii in order to investigate how position informs relation, so altering the terms of engagement between critic and artwork. This has adopted feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s insertion of the term ‘to’ into ‘I love you’ producing ‘I love to you’ in order to stress reciprocity and mediation – the ‘in-direction between us’, xxxiv and Michel Serres’s focus on the transformational aspect of prepositions:

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-
possés transform men. xxxv

A shift in preposition allows a different dynamic of power to be articulated, where, for example, the terms of domination and subjugation indicated by ‘over’ and ‘under’ can be replaced by the equivalence suggested by ‘to’ and ‘with’. My own impulse to ‘write’ rather than ‘write about’ architecture, aims to shift the relation between the critic and her object of study from one of mastery – the object under critique – or distance – writing about an object – to one of equivalence and analogy – writing as the object. xxxvi

The use of analogy – the desire to invent a writing that is somehow ‘like’ the artwork – allows a certain creativity to intervene in the critical act as the critic comes to understand and interpret the work by remaking it on his/her own terms.

So to conclude this introductory section of my talk. If, following cultural critic Mieke Bal’s definition, ‘art-writing’ is a mode of criticism which aims to 'put the art first', then Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism aims to put the sites of engagement with art first. These include the sites – material, emotional, political and conceptual – of the artwork’s construction, exhibition and documentation, as well as those remembered, dreamed and imagined by the artist, critic and other viewers.

In conducting ‘close readings’ of specific artworks, Bal recognizes the important role that architecture plays in encounters with art. In her book on Louise Bourgeois’ Spider, in which she coins the wonderful phrase ‘the architecture of art-writing’, from which my book draws its subtitle. xxxviii Site-Writing extends Bal’s tempting proposition into the construction of texts – essays and installations – that write the sites of my own encounters with artworks by artists such as Jananne Al-Ani, Elina Brotherus, Nathan Coley, Tracey Emin, Cristina Iglesias and Do-Ho Suh.

Site-Writing configures what happens when discussions when the spatial qualities of writing become as important in conveying meaning as the content of the criticism. My suggestion is that, in operating as mode of a practice in its own right, this kind of criticism questions the terms of reference that relate the critic to the work positioned ‘under’ critique. Combining differing genres and modes of writing, whose ‘voices’ are objective and subjective, distant and intimate, this approach develops alternative understandings of subjectivity and positionality. From the close-up to the glance, from the caress to the accidental brush, Site-Writing challenges criticism as a form of knowledge with a singular and static point of view located in the here and now. This
process of configuration rewrites the sites between critic, work and artist, as well as critic, text and reader, and in so doing constructs an architecture of art criticism.

**To Miss the Desert**

**Around the Centre**

Surrounding her house is a moat of flints with furrows running through it at regular intervals like a ploughed field. When you run up and down these slopes, you can lose your footing and slip, and that is when you know the sharp-looking stones really can cut your knees. Still it is safer here, than beyond the walls in the waste-ground of dry bushes and stinging insects, where hyenas cry in the night.

A hallway forms the centre of the house. It has a tiled floor, hard and shiny, at night she comes here to catch insects. Many creatures skulk across it, ants and spiders, and some more sinister, whose names she does not yet know. But as long as she is careful to catch them under her glass jar with its smooth edge, the one that meets the marble without making any gaps, she is safe to sit and watch the trapped insects inside.

14 Floor Finishes
Location G6
Lay new flooring 300 mm x 300 mm terracotta unglazed tiles with sandstone colour grout 10 mm wide joints.
All tiles to be laid out from centre line.
Finished floor level to match G5.

A small pig and a spider; the tin roof drums with yet more rain. The rains have come early this year, and they are heavy. She lies tucked up in bed, reading about Charlotte and her web. Her tummy aches. It is swollen, a bit yellow, and worse still, it sticks out. Today she has had her tenth injection, thankfully the final one. Each time the fat needle went into her it made another mark, making a circle around her tummy button, first at mid-day, then at six o’clock, then at three o’clock, then at nine o’clock, and then all the way around again, until she felt bruised and sore.

Big injections had been talked about ever since Bobby the dog got a tick on the rim of his eye. The tick would not come free, not even with a burnt match and ghee. Poor
Bobby, with his sad eyes and velvet brown ears, got sicker and sicker. He lay on his side in the shade, panting, his ribs heaving in and out. Sometimes his tummy shook. Finally, he was taken away, to the vets, and never came back.

They kept on talking about big injections. No one seemed to know why Bobby had been sick, was it from tick fever or rabies? Tick fever was not a worry, they said, but rabies certainly was. It turned you mad, frothing at the mouth and running screaming from water, until it got you in the end. Everyone agreed it was the vets’ fault; they had burnt Bobby’s body. Anyone knows that you should keep the head and take a slide from the brain before burning it. Only then, when you look at that slide, can you tell whether or not the dog had rabies.

Had Bobby licked her hands, they wanted to know. They looked at all the scratches. She always had cuts on her hands from stone hunting and mud-pie baking, she told them. Of course Bobby had licked her hands, especially when she tried to comfort him at the end, poor Bobby.

On an Ethiopian airlines plane, a DC3, with their ‘13 Months of Sunshine’ posters, all the way from Addis Ababa, came the special cool box. She knew the route well; it took you past Gondar, Lalibella and the place beginning with D. You could get out there for a bit to play on the grass by the lake. For eating your snack of bread and jam, the stewardess gave you a bright orange cushion.

The cool box was delivered right to her door by the nice Dutch Doctor. It was packed with jars of a plum-coloured syrup and big plastic syringes, ‘horse syringes’, the Doctor said and laughed. To keep them cold, everything else had to be taken out of the fridge.

*I swing back and forth, higher and higher, watching my dark shadow on the dirt. As mid-day approaches, my shadow grows smaller, and then it disappears. Everything is grey but it is not a shade I have seen before. It is not a dull grey, like the light on a cloudy day when shadows cover up the sun, but bright and dazzling, a grey that hurts my eyes. I look up. The sun has disappeared. Instead there is a black hole. Around the centre is a halo of white light.*

Along the Edge
The bathroom has a floor of polished marble, black, interwoven with white veins. Perched on the toilet, with her feet dangling off the ground, she traces the white lines with her gaze. She keeps alert for cockroaches, at any time an intruder might crawl through the cracks along the edge of the room and into the blackness. Inside her house all the floors are marble, smooth and cool, laid out in careful grids, except for the big golden rug. In the evening when the sun is in the west, the rug glows. At this time of day she likes to follow the intricate patterns with her feet, like paths around a secret garden. But if you dance along the edge of the squares, you must be careful not to fall in, who knows what could lie in wait for you in such an enchanted place.

Our initial proposal is for a one-storey building with a courtyard at the centre and the accommodation along the edge of the site. This means that the building will be fully accessible without the additional cost of a lift and there will be no problems of overlooking. The main entrance leads to a central courtyard, covered and top lit. All the other facilities are to be accessed off this space.

Along one edge of the garden are the homes of two men. Gullum is tall and fair skinned, with light hair and green eyes; and Kareem shorter, stockier, darker. They have fought each other in the past, and will again when the Soviets come to Kabul, and then again, when her own people search the Hindu Kush to wipe out all evil. But for now, there is no fighting, once the sun has gone down, they sit and eat together.

On weekday mornings she has to wait by the gate for the yellow school bus. She goes to a Catholic school, but the Italian Priest who teaches her has not noticed yet that she never reads the bible. They call him a real revolutionary, a man who fights for the people of Afghanistan. On days when she does not have to go to school, she swims in the streams of the Hindu Kush, looks at blue pots in Istalif, wooden chests in Peshawar, plastic boots in the Kabul bazaar, and one day, she goes south, to visit Kareem’s home.

He is a man with property: land and wives. Inside the walls of his house are sunlit orchards full of dark purple fruit. Among the trees his wives sit. Dressed in shades of red, some of the women have covered their faces, others have painted their toes nails pink. From a distance, the women watch them arrive, disappearing inside as they draw closer.
The guests are taken upstairs to a long veranda overlooking the garden. The only furniture here is the carpet laid out in a long line down the middle of the room. Men in turbans sit cross-legged along the edge and eat from the dishes laid out in front of them. They are invited to sit down and eat – the only women – her mother, her sister, and herself.

After the meal, as they walk back down through the dark house to leave, she sees a pair of eyes watching her from behind a screen. The eyes belong to a girl, a girl with the hands of a woman, a woman who glints with silver. Later she learns that this is Kareem’s youngest wife, once a nomad, who carries her wealth in the jewels on her fingers.

My own dress is set with tiny mirrors and a handsome square of embroidery at the front. It is hard work to get on, with no fastenings and a fabric so thin it could rip. In this dress I feel just like all the other Afghan girls. Except that they wear their dresses a bit softer, sometimes black. I wonder whether it is to match the black around the edges of their eyes.

At the Threshold
A hot tent, the swathes of sheet are close enough to make me sweat. I rush headlong into the redness, with sultry breath and a swollen tongue. Down and down, round and round … swirling in the shallows. The waves rise up and over me. I sink into a world beneath the sand. Towards me, staggering, comes a soldier, left, right, left, right … I open my eyes. I am in a palace of lilac silk, a cool object is on my chest and something metal in my mouth. A smooth brown hand holds mine.

Her mother tells her a story of how she taught the Sheik’s niece English. She was allowed to go inside the harem, and saw that underneath their burqas the women wore make up and perfume. For her labours, she was offered a gift. She asked for a gold leaf burqa, the costume only the wives of the sheik can wear.
Her mother’s labour is not easy; she refuses to come out. Her mother walks the dunes along the creek, back and forth, past the apartment block where she lives, but still she waits inside, for a night and a day. The chance of infection is high. There is no glass in the hospital windows. A caesarian section might kill them both, one of them for sure, certainly her mother if she turns out to be carrying a son. Fortunately there is a woman who is willing to take a chance. On the second night of her mother’s labour, the hospital is almost empty; everyone has gone, to feast, to break the fast. A nurse runs a drip to encourage her out. But she holds her ground. The nurse turns the drip up. Still she refuses to budge. The drip is turned up again, faster, until she has no choice but to leave her warm waters and enter the world.

For her entrance, and her mother’s bother, the sheik sends his apologies. ‘Sorry’, he said, ‘so sorry it isn’t a boy’. For a boy he would have sent a watch, but for the girl, a tiny gold coffee pot on a gold chain.

14 Floor Finishes
Location 1.5 and G5
Forbo Nairn lino sheeting 1.5 mm to be laid on 6 mm wbp ply sub floor.
Ply and lino to run under appliances and around kitchen units.
Colour tba by client.
Aluminium threshold at junction with G2, G6 and 1.1.

*Born on the eve of the haj, I am a hajia. I will never have to make the journey to Mecca.*

In the Middle
Two concrete paths lead away from the gate, with a long line of zenias in the middle. A small girl in an orange dress comes here often in her search for special stone. Before she crouches down to pick one out, she checks for scorpions.

On the window cill is a row of large tins that have once contained milk powder. Now they hold a collection of carefully chosen and prized items. She takes her stones out and covers them in water so that they glisten. Then she sorts them according to their colour. Her favourites form the most important group, seven in number, one for each colour of the rainbow. She puts them in a safe place, on a small piece of cloth on the table next to her bed. On certain days she takes the stones out into the garden and
lays them on a soft patch in the rough grass. Right in the middle she places the violet one. Put right there, it will bring her luck when looking for four-leafed clovers.

She has been told to always shake her shoes out before putting them on, in case a scorpion might be hiding in the toes. And she must make sure to check for them too beneath the ground sheet of tents. Scorpions like nothing better than a warm dark place to nest.

Once when she was small, she and her mother went to camp with her father as he checked wells. They slept in a tent, with their daughter between them. Later as they broke camp, under the ground sheet, right in the middle, a large yellow scorpion was found.

They say the way to make a scorpion suffer is to build a circle of fire, place the insect in the middle and watch the poor thing sting itself to death.

There is an option of making a partition in the middle, between the crèche and the café, a flexible one. The partition we have suggested would be half-hour fire resisting and provide equivalent acoustic separation to that of a standard brick wall.

One hot day, she takes the lids off the tins, and pours out her stones over the floor. There is a scuttling sound. She stands firm and watches; in the warm moist interior of the tins, a family of yellow scorpions has hatched and is coming to the surface. She screams. Kareem comes running. He kills each scorpion calmly with the bare of his heel.

She hates camping, almost as much as she hates churches. She finds them both boring. But the soft black of a Bedouin tent, that is different ...

It is a scorching hot day in San Francisco. Anyone with any sense is on a rooftop or in a park. Instead I force myself through the modern art collection. The gallery is badly lit; each room is a different shade of grey. They say they are going to renovate soon. I stop at another tedious canvas square. This time it is black. I stare hard. Nothing
happens. Then I scrunch up my eyes and look out to the middle distance from between the fringes of my lashes. And remember what it feels like, to miss the desert.
Endnote

‘To Miss the Desert’ is an essay written in relation to Nathan Coley’s *Black Tent* (2003) a work curated by Gavin Wade for *Art and Sacred Spaces*. *Black Tent* had developed out of Coley’s interest in religious structures in general but particularly the evocative and precise description of the construction of the tabernacle given in the bible. Wade had read a piece of my writing, where I questioned whether it was possible to ‘write architecture’, rather than ‘write about architecture’, and so he asked me to ‘write a tabernacle’. The essay I wrote in response reworks in writing Coley’s *Black Tent* in both form and content.

*Black Tent* consists of a flexible structure, a number of steel-framed panels with black fabric screens stretched across them. Several coloured panels and small square transparent ‘windows’ criss-crossed with stitching are inserted into the screens. *Black Tent* moved to a number of sites in Portsmouth, including two in the Cathedral, reconfiguring itself for each location.

My essay investigates the changing position of the subject in relation to material details and psychic experiences of safety and danger. It places personal memories of home next to professional descriptions of architectural spaces. The main narrative remembers a childhood spent settling into various nomadic cultures and countries in the Middle East. A second type of spatial description taken from the design of contemporary sanctuaries, specifically a series of community buildings for different minority groups, intervenes. These texts derive from written proposals and construction specifications that I was, when working as an architectural designer, closely involved in producing.

The two modes of representation are pitched against one another to create a dynamic between private and public sanctuary. One draws on memories to conjure up spaces of security; the other adopts a professional tone to describe various sanctuaries at different scales and stages of the design process. The narrative itself is also spatial, like the squares, it has two sides, two voices. Predominantly written in the third person, it is punctuated at intervals by short interjections in the first person, that aim to change the reader’s relation to the sites described.
Structured into several sections, each one composed around a different spatial condition, such as ‘around the centre’ and ‘along the edge’, my essay, like Coley’s work, explores the nature of boundary conditions: specific and generic, political and personal, material and psychic. xliiv Paralleling Coley’s interest in the bounded site of the religious sanctuary, my central spatial motifs are the secular sanctuaries of home and refuge. xlv The two forms of variation in the composition of my essay – the separate sections divided according to spatial thematics and the varying combinations of text and voice within each section – echo aspects of the siting of Black Tent – the changing position of the work in relation to its shifting location and the differing configuration of the panels of the piece itself depending on their situation. xlvii
An Embellishment: Purdah

When, in 2006 I directed a research cluster called *Spatial Imagination in Design* consisting of 14 artists/designers/architects/writers exploring the spatial imagination through the production of artifacts for an exhibition at the Domo Baal Gallery, London, I selected 12 short extracts from ‘To Miss the Desert’ and rewrote them for my own two-part text installation *An Embellishment: Purdah*. As ‘scenes’ of equal length, they were laid out in the catalogue as a grid, three squares wide by four high, to match the 12 panes of glass in the west-facing window of the gallery looking onto the street. Where across the glass, I repeatedly wrote the word ‘*purdah*’ in black kohl in the script of Afghanistan’s official languages – Dari and Pashto.

The term *purdah* means curtain in Persian and describes the cultural practice of separating and hiding women through clothing and architecture – veils, screens and walls – from the public male gaze. The fabric veil has been compared to its architectural equivalent – the *mashrabiyya* – an ornate wooden screen and feature of traditional North African domestic architecture, which also ‘demarcates the line between public and private space’. The origins of *purdah*, culturally, religiously and geographically, are highly debated, and connected to class as well as gender. The current manifestation of this gendered spatial practice varies according to location and involves covering different combinations of women’s hair, face, eyes and body.

In Afghanistan, for example, under the Taliban, when in public, women were required to wear what has been termed a *burqa*. A term of Pakistani origin, in Afghanistan the full-length veil is more commonly known as the *chadoree or chadari*, a variation of the Persian *chador*, meaning tent. This loose garment, usually sky-blue, covers the body from head to foot. The only part of the woman to be seen are her eyes, the rims outlined with black kohl (perhaps only in a westerner’s imagination) looking out through the window of an embroidered screen.
Although in 1959 the Prime Minister of Afghanistan Muhammad Daoud had abolished veiling and seclusion for women, when the Taliban took over Kabul in September 1996 they issued edicts prohibiting women from working outside the home, attending school, or leaving the home unless accompanied by a close male relative as chaperone – mahram (husband, brother, father or son). In public women had to hide themselves in a chadari – a body-length covering with only a mesh opening through which to see and breathe. Women were not permitted to wear white shoes or socks – the colour of the Taliban flag, nor shoes that made a sound when they walked. Houses and buildings with women present in public view were to have their windows painted.

It is understandable then that discussions around the veil provoke much controversy, especially in feminism, and it is worth briefly outlining the issues at stake. In an account of arguments for and against the veil raised in early twentieth-century Egypt in response to the publication in 1899 of Qassim Amin’s Tahrir Al-Mar’a (The Liberation of Woman), Leila Ahmed argues that in identifying the veil as a tool of female oppression, feminism has, perhaps unwittingly, along with anthropology, played the role of ‘handmaid’ to colonialism. In using the veil to represent Muslim culture as backward, the aim of unveiling women in order to liberate them from repression, has operated as the mode of justification for one patriarchal culture to possess another. This is an attitude and practice witnessed historically, for example, in the French colonization of Algeria, where, as Ahmed quotes from Franz Fanon’s A Dying Colonialism (1967), ‘the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria’. More recently unveiling was given as one of the reasons to justify the invasion of Afghanistan by today’s crusaders – the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies – to depose a regime, which, as well as supporting terrorists, also oppressed women through its use of the veil, repeatedly.

Repetition is the acting out of that which has been repressed in the unconscious. Artist Sharon Kivland has pointed out that:

Repetition, for Freud, is the incessant exposure to horrible or upsetting events and circumstances, the compulsion to repeat an act when its origins are forgotten. Unless one remembers the past, if events are suppressed, something is returned in one’s actions.
In re-writing the word *purdah* across the glass, the embellishment of the window surface is an act of repetition. It is also one of separation and connection. Calligraphy has been used as a screening device by artists such as Mona Hatoum in her *Measures of Distance* (1988), where video images of the artist’s mother are overlaid with the Arabic text of the letters she sent to her daughter from Beirut. This image is accompanied by a two-part sound track, in which the artist reads a clear translation of the letters in English, while in the background a playful but indistinguishable interchange takes place in Arabic between two women.\textsuperscript{biii} In her photographs of women covered with calligraphy, Lalla Essaydi focuses on how this Islamic art form has been made inaccessible to women, whereas the use of henna as a form of adornment is considered ‘women’s work’.\textsuperscript{lix} Describing how under the Taliban regime, in Shia areas such as Herat, in western Afghanistan, women’s lives were the most oppressed, Christina Lamb’s *The Sewing Circles of Heart* discovers how, in order for women writers to read, share ideas and study banned foreign literature, they had to meet under the guise of sewing groups, such as the Golden Needle Sewing Circle.\textsuperscript{lx}

For *An Embellishment: Purdah* in repeatedly writing the same word, focusing on its precise formation, again and again, I recalled my school days writing out sentences, aiming to make my handwriting as small as possible so that, as a left hander, I did not smudge the ink. In trying not to spoil the perfect letters formed of liquid kohl, I realised that I was writing from left to right, writing against the flow of an Arabic or Persian text.

In taking the form of an embellishment, repetition, as a kind of remembering, can also be linked to reminiscence. Kivland’s account continues:

And while the analytic process may not aim at reliving past experience, at feeling the same emotions of the past, this still happens. In reminiscing, stories are embellished, made better or worse, and so occupy a register of the imaginary.\textsuperscript{lxii}
I imagined that for An Embellishment: Purdah when the sun set the writing would, like a rug, form a pattern on the gallery floor, where the viewer’s shadow, facing west (away from Mecca), would be cast behind him/her. In early January, the time of year that the work was installed, the sun was too low in the sky to create the intended shadow, yet other unexpected effects were produced which resonated with the concerns of the piece. To perform the writing I had to stand in the window, my face screened by my writing, occupying a position behind a veil that I had not imagined. As night fell light from the inside gallery illuminated my body.

Iranian director Moshen Makhmalbaf’s film Kandahar (2001) tells the story of an Afghan woman journalist living in Canada who travels back to Afghanistan when her sister writes from Kandahar to say she is going to kill herself before the next solar eclipse. The female protagonist’s journey is at times filmed from behind the burqa she is wearing, offering western audiences a view out from the inside of the veil, so reversing the usual media representation of the camera imaging a covered faceless figure. And it is the disguise offered by the veil in Yasmina Khadra’s The Swallows of Kabul, that allows the central characters – two Afghan women – to change positions unnoticed and dramatically alter the narrative as agents of their own history.

The rise in interest in the veil through cultural forms – film and literature – has increased dramatically since the western invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. But these stories told from ‘behind the veil’ are often authored by those who have not experienced this reality directly, extending the problem of the western-dominated representation of the veil in the media, which, in Christina Noelle-Karimi’s opinion, has rendered Afghan women faceless and voiceless: the veil obscures their faces; while others tell their stories. The author of Swallows, for example, is a male Algerian army officer, Mohammed Moulessehoul, who took a feminine pseudonym to avoid submitting his manuscripts for army approval. Khaled Hosseini, author of The Kite Runner, and A Thousand Splendid Suns, another story that focuses on an allegiance forged between two very different Afghan women, left Kabul in the 1970s. Beneath the Veil (2001), a documentary famous for showing the execution of a woman under the Taliban regime, was made by Saira Shah, a woman of Afghan descent, but raised in the United Kingdom, while The Kabul Beauty School (2004) and Afghan Ladies Driving School (2006), both documentaries showing women’s lives in Kabul, have also been made by those from the west.
An *Embellishment: Purdah* does not make a judgement on the veil; rather it wishes to show how things seem quite different depending on where you are. From inside the gallery and outside on the street – by day and by night – the work changes according to the position occupied. Sometimes transparent, at other times opaque, revealing then concealing, this embellishment or decorative covering invites the viewer to imagine beyond the places s/he can see.

In selecting and reconfiguring ‘scenes’ from the essay into two complementary parts – one a text in a book and the other in a window – *An Embellishment: Purdah* was a response to two sites, Nathan Coley’s *Black Tent* and the architectural space of the domoBaal contemporary art gallery, London. While *Black Tent* uses black squares to mark the boundary of newly created sanctuaries, and ‘To Miss the Desert’ is structured according to spatial conditions, such as ‘Along the Edge’ and ‘At the Threshold’, *An Embellishment: Purdah* responds to the specific quality of the window as an edge or threshold, marking the frontier between inside and outside. This ‘site-writing’ positions itself in relation to thresholds, both material and conceptual, transforming itself in response to the demands of changing sites, configuring and reconfiguring the relationship between criticism and work.

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Biography


She is on the Editorial Board for ARQ (Architectural Research Quarterly) and the Journal of Visual Culture in Britain, a member of the AHRC Peer Review College (2004–2008) and chair of the RIBA President’s Awards for Research (2005–). In 2006 she was a research fellow at CRASSH (Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities) at the University of Cambridge and received an honorary degree from the University College of the Creative Arts.
Communication in Modern Art and the listener, rather than simply given. See Grant H. Kester, and as well as literary critic Mikhail Bahktin's work on how meaning is constructed between the speaker in response to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas on 'face
H. Kester examines artworks that are based on conversation through a theoretical framework developed
Aesthetics invite the viewer to participate in the construction of the work. See Nicholas Bourriaud,


These arguments are taken from the introduction to Rendell, Site-Writing.


For Nicholas Bourriaud, in relational art, the work of art operates as a partial object, a vehicle of relation to the other producing open-ended conditions that avoid prioritizing the producer and instead invite the viewer to participate in the construction of the work. See Nicholas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002). Grant H. Kester examines artworks that are based on conversation through a theoretical framework developed in response to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas on ‘face-to-face’ encounter and the irreducible ‘Other’ and as well as literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on how meaning is constructed between the speaker and the listener, rather than simply given. See Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

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\(^4\) 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); and Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002).


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xii Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 133.


xx Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 64.

xxi Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 64.

xxii Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 64.


xxviii Bal, Louise Bourgeois’s Spider, p. 2.


Nathan Coley’s fascination with places of religious worship runs through his practice. An early work, Fourteen Churches of Münster (2000), comprises a street plan and the view from a helicopter circling fourteen churches in the city: in the Second World War allied bomber pilots were issued with an order to target them. The Lamp of Sacrifice, 161 Places of Worship, Birmingham (2000) and The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship, Worship, Edinburgh (2004) consist of cardboard models of all the places of worship in the towns listed in the Yellow Pages, have been argued to express the premise of Coley’s work – that architectural forms remain empty contained until socially occupied. See Martin Herbert, ‘Nathan Coley, Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh’, Art Monthly, n. 278 (July–August 2004) pp. 35–37, p. 36. More recent projects, such as There Will Be No Miracles Here (2005) Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, question the passivity of architecture especially in current religious conflicts. One part of the exhibition – Camouflage Mosque, Camouflage Synagogue, Camouflage Church – comprises three models covered in ‘dazzle’ camouflage, a technique applied to ships during both World Wars as protection from attack. See Andrea Schlieker, ‘Negotiating the Invisible: Nathan Coley at Mount Stuart’ at http://www.haunchofvenison.com/en/#page=London.arts.nathan_coley


xlii The use of black occurs in a number of other works by Coley from 2002, such as Black Maria, see endnote 52 below, and I Don’t Have Another Land (2002) in which a black-painted metal model of the M&S building in Manchester Arndale Centre, blown up by the IRA in 1996, is presented with a line from a Jewish folk song as its title and across the space where its windows should be.

xliii Coley’s work has examined the representation of architecture through different kinds of media simultaneously, for example, Minster (1998) an installation in The Tate Gallery Liverpool, consisted of slide projected images of a non-conformist chapel in Liverpool’s Toxteth, a recorded lecture of a guided tour of York Minster and an explanatory pamphlet describing the correct procedure for establishing a tabernacle or portable sanctuary. See Nick Barley (ed.) Leaving Tracks: Artranspennine98, an International Contemporary Visual Art Exhibition Recorded (London: August Media Ltd., 1999) pp. 78–81.


Related work has examined the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the prefabs built in a single day in 1937 in Tower and Wall (1937 prefabs) (2005), and the more recent white modernist structures, which have been described as ‘co-opt[ing]’ Corbusian ideals ‘into the Zionist project’ in Emanuel (1972 Settlement Offensive) (2004). See Sumantro Ghose, ‘Nathan Coley: Haunch of Venison’, Modern Painters (March 2005) p. 103. Coley has also investigated the frontier between indigenous populations and occupying forces through the façades constructed in American ‘westerns’. For The Black Maria/Places Where Something Has Happened (2002) in Christchurch, New Zealand, Coley produced a black-painted wooden replica of Black Maria, the first film studio built by Thomas Edison in 1893. See Kate Montgomery, ‘Nathan Coley: The Black Maria/Places Where Something Has Happened’, Christchurch, New Zealand, The Physics Room Annual 2002 (December 2003). For his show at the Haunch of Venison, Berlin, 2008, Coley
re-made another 1880s ‘western’ façade, at 80% of its real size, as in film sets, with the words – WEALTH, BELIEF, LAND, MIND, LIFE (the five rights that every human is granted under Islam) written over the doors. See http://www.haunchofvenison.com/en/#page=berlin.exhibitions.2008.nathan_coley (accessed 3 July 2008).

Coley’s interest in sanctuaries has been related to their role as places of refuge outside state control. See Nathan Coley, Urban Sanctuary: A Public Art Work by Nathan Coley (Glasgow: The Armpit Press, 1997) which comprised a series of interviews with eight people including a policeman and a feng shui practitioner where the artist asked each person what the term sanctuary meant to them and documented their answers.

Coley’s Show Home (2003) curated by Locus +, and commissioned by North Tyneside Council, a replica of a traditional rural cottage, also moved sites, this time in Tyneside over a three-day period – a marina, a suburban housing estate and a school playing field surrounded by security fences. See http://www.showhome.org.uk/ (accessed 3 July 2008) and Paul Usherwood, ‘Nathan Coley: North Shields’, Art Monthly, n. 268 (July 2003) pp. 46–47. Coley’s interest in the potential significance of a work’s location is present for example, in the placing of Show Home, on the roof of the City Arts Centre, Dublin, adjacent to its financial centre at a time when property prices were surging. For Coley’s commentary on the position of his own practice with respect to the current discourse on art and site-specificity, see ‘Nathan Coley in Conversation with Claire Doherty’, Claire Doherty (ed.) Thinking of the Outside: New Art and the City of Bristol (Bristol: University of the West of England and Bristol Legible City in Association with Arnolfini, 2005) pp. 30–37, p. 31.


Afghanistan’s official languages Dari, a version of Persian, and Pashto are written primarily in the Arabic alphabet. One report states that Dari is spoken by the Tajiks (25–30% of the Afghan population) and Pashto by the Pashtuns (45–50% of the Afghan population). See Physicians for Human Rights, Women’s Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan: A Population-Based Assessment (31 December 2001) p. 17. However, another source holds that ‘according to recent US government estimates, approximately 35 percent of the Afghan population speaks Pashto, and about 50 percent speaks Dari’. http://www.afghan-web.com/language/ (accessed 14 May 2008).

Quoting Malek Alloula, David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros describe how the veil marks the closure of private space and its extension to public space where the viewer is to be found. See David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, ‘Introduction’, Bailey and Tawadros (eds) Veil, pp. 16–39, pp. 22–23. Referring to the writings of Hamid Naficy on the poetics and politics of the veil in revolutionary Iranian cinema, Bailey and Tawadros suggest that veiling is not fixed or unidirectional, but that it is rather ‘a dynamic practice in which both men and women are implicated’, and that the relation between veiling and unveiling is dialectical.


For example Ahdaf Soueif in a discussion of the differing practices and terms for the veil in Muslim cultures across the world including Arab countries, focuses on the history of its use in Cairo, Egypt. He explains how in the early twentieth-century the tarha – a thin material to cover the hair in white or black and yashmak – a white veil worn across the face under eyes – were adopted by women of the aristocracy, while the burqu’ – a rectangle of fishnet which hung under the eyes fastened over the nose with a small decorative gold or brass cylinder – an arousa – was worn by working class women, and the bisha – which covered the whole face – was neutral in class terms. Between the 1920s to the 1960s, as part of the move to accept western culture, the veil was rejected, except the bisha, which continued to be worn by working class women and more traditional women of all classes over 50. The veil was taken up again as the hijab and the full niqab in the 1970s and more recently as a sign of resistance to the west. See Ahdaf Soueif, ‘The Language of the Veil’, first published in The Guardian, weekend supplement (8 December 2001) pp. 29–32 and reprinted in Bailey and Tawadros (eds) Veil, pp. 110–119.
Christina Noelle-Karimi discusses how the *chadari* was originally a town fashion, worn by middle-class women to show they did not work with their hands, and as a sign of distinction by women whose husbands has secured government employment. Rural women wore a head scarf or *chadar*, and reserved the *chadari* for trips to town. See Christina Noelle-Karimi, *History Lessons: In Afghanistan's Decades of Confrontation with Modernity*, Women have always been the Focus of Conflict’ (April 2002). See http://www.wellesley.edu/womensreview/archive/2002/04/highlit.html. (accessed 14 May 2008).

See Physicians for Human Rights, *Women's Health and Human Rights*, p. 19 and p. 23. The reports states in a rather contradictory manner that the dress code of the *chadari* was particularly strict in Kabul, but less rigorously enforced in rural or non–Pashtun areas, see p. 19, footnote 53, but also that there were more severe restrictions enforced in non-Pashtun areas, see p. 23.


Samira’s Makhmalbaf’s *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003) made by Moshen Makhmalbaf’s daughter, also focuses on the life of women in Afghanistan.


Noelle-Karimi, *History Lessons*.


See Saira Shah, *Beneath the Veil* (2001) a documentary produced for Channel 4 in Britain. See for example http://www.cnn.com/NN/Programs/presents/index.veil.html. (accessed 14 May 2008). Her novel *The Storyteller’s Daughter: One Woman’s Return to Her Lost Homeland* traces her journey back to her family’s lost homeland in Paghman. See Saira Shah, *The Storyteller’s Daughter: One Woman’s Return to Her Lost Homeland* (London: Michael Joseph, 2002). Both *Beneath the Veil* and *Kandahar* have been harshly critiqued by Martin Kramer who states that Shah does not take into account, for example, the fact that the woman executed had murdered her husband, and that the same executionary practice occurs in Saudi Arabia today without comment. See Martin Kramer, *The Camera and the Burqa*, *Middle