

Disciplinarity: undoing it yourself, and with others

Gilly Karjevsky: The last time that we met (physically) we were discussing terminology. I invited you to talk about Terminology to open the Lexicon lecture series at the Floating University Berlin, as the writer that coined critical spatial practice¹ - a term that eventually evolved into what I perceive to be my discipline. When I think and talk about my own practice, I really think through the prism of critical spatial practice, because it does so well define the boundaries in which I work. And I am not the only practitioner who does - the term has been taken on by many, resulting in various academic programs providing diplomas under this exact or similar terms of spatial practices. Did you ever consider when writing about critical spatial practice and offering it as a term that it would one day be perceived as a discipline by a practitioner?

Jane Rendell: No, I didn't ever expect it to be thought of as a discipline. But I did hope that it might help people navigate their way through the work that they do, that it might help practitioners to negotiate the edges and crossovers of different types of practice. I'd come out of an architecture school where I was quite disappointed with the way in which theory and practice were related, and into an art school where I was teaching designers and artists together in a course called the theory and practice of public art and design. But it was also, and the title gives it away, a place for thinking about a much more dynamic relation of theory *and* practice. So I think the thing that was for me the motivation for thinking about the relation of theory and practice, was my interest in critical theory. Not from a philosophical perspective, *per se*, but what theory could do for practice, and vice versa. There's amazing work done on the history of critical theory from the Frankfurt School, but the two principles I draw out of critical theory are self-reflection – being really attentive to your own processes, and social critique – the importance of critiquing what is happening in the world around you. And I thought, well could these principles underpinning critical theory not also be principles to inspire modes of practice. I guess I wasn't interested in any kind of practice that might slip out of art and into architecture or vice versa, but certain types of practice that are defined not by their discipline, but by the way that they do things – that combine reflection on their own modes of operation and a push for social critique in some way. For the Frankfurt School critique is a social critique of capitalism as a social system of oppression. But of course, it's not only a social critique of capitalism that's required, but also a social critique of many other modes of oppression, patriarchal, hetero-sexist, colonialist, racist, etc. So the motivation for coming up with the term 'critical spatial practice' was in order to find a way of understanding practice through the principles of critical theory, and of course Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre's work on spatial practice are important references for me here.²

Gilly Karjevsky: Let's expand on the different scales of the self-reflection; the individual practice and self-reflection within it, that relates to social critique, and the scale or the dimension of the collective, the societal, where criticality is also crucial. There are those constant relays between our own conditions and environs and the way that our own individual practice exposes and questions social dynamics by intervening with and critiquing bigger structures. There is a kind of relay, in

¹ Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

almost every conversation that we have, especially these days during coronavirus lockdown, moving between the idea and scales of self-care, and caring for others, caring with others and so on. And thinking with a particular discipline through this relay between self-reflection as a form of self-care, and social reflection as a form of caring for others - actually provides you with a framework for action. So in a sense, what critical spatial practice provided me as a discipline was an agency to act and create in the world, within a framework that better suited the way I wanted to unpack my own practice. Which begs the question: do we actually need a discipline so that we can position ourselves to act in the world? Or is this construct of discipline not serving us anymore?

Jane Rendell: Yes, and, what *is* discipline and how do we define it? And whether we think of discipline as a subject or a set of methods that are dictated by a subject or whether a discipline can be defined by a methodology itself? The philosopher, Peter Osborne, has done incredible work on the history of disciplinarity, not just trying to define what a discipline is, but to distinguish conceptually between discipline, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity.³ Osborne claims that ‘Disciplines are institutional forms for the generational transmission of intellectual practices – traditions handed down and also therefore, of course, betrayed’.⁴ Here discipline is attached to practice and to a disciple who is learning, and he opposes this to doctrine, or what he describes as theory, that is the property of the teacher. So actually discipline, surprisingly, in this history, is not on the side of the teacher as the disciplinarian, but on the side of the scholar, the student, trying to learn the practice of their discipline. This fits very closely to the idea the one might be disciplining oneself (through processes of self-reflection and self-critique) and that such processes could have a beneficial aspect in terms of learning a practice – one submits oneself to practice one’s discipline. This is not really how I had thought of discipline before, rather I had thought of discipline as in ‘being disciplined’, by someone, and so being disciplined as something that one might oppose, like an institutional power structure that one would be working against. And that’s probably because I was coming at it from a feminist perspective. I saw architectural disciplining as having all kinds of patriarchal underpinnings that needed to be refuted at all costs. The first autobiographical piece that I wrote was about a shared house that I lived in, where one person was doing a very unconventional form of DIY, which undid parts of the structure. I called it ‘Undoing it Yourself’.⁵ The intention was to also undo academic disciplinary structures – in particular the neutral, objective voice that in many disciplines is still understood as the definition of academic rigour. This has, of course, has been massively challenged by feminist poststructuralism, most famously by Donna’s Haraway’s essay “situated knowledge”⁶ and “partial objectivity”.⁷

Gilly Karjevsky: So the attempt for unlearning a discipline is really not the push against the discipline itself, but against the social paradigms that dominate it. This might not actually come

³ Peter Osborne, ‘Problematizing Disciplinarity, Transdisciplinary Problematics’, *Theory, Culture & Society* (2015), 32:5–6, 3–35.

⁴ Peter Osborne, ‘Problematizing Disciplinarity, Transdisciplinary Problematics’, p. 6.

⁵ This essay was originally published in a longer version as Jane Rendell, ‘Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse’, Jonathan Hill (ed.) *Occupying Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1998) pp. 229–246. It was radically shortened and reworked as Jane Rendell, ‘(Un)doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse’, *The Journal of Architecture* v. 4 (Spring 1999) pp. 101–110. An alternative version was republished as ‘Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself’, in PEAR (Paper for Emerging Architectural Research) Matthew Butcher and Megan O’Shea (eds) (London, 2012) and as Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB Tauris, 2010) pp. 27–34. Most recently a new version has been published as Jane Rendell, ‘Undoing Architecture’, in *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance*, curated by Irene Aristizábal (Nottingham Contemporary), Rosie Cooper (De La Warr Pavilion) and Cédric Fauq (Nottingham Contemporary) designed by OOMK, (Nottingham Contemporary and De La Warr Pavilion (2018-9).

⁶ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, v. 14, n. 3, (Autumn 1988) pp. 575-599.

⁷ Haraway

from the discipline itself, but from the context in which the discipline is taught. And when we talk about undoing disciplines, we don't really talk about undoing architecture per se, for example, or undoing urbanism or undoing art, we're talking about undoing the local and the universal power dynamics that are framing the practice.

Jane Rendell: I like that you highlight the context in which the discipline is taught, and that in your own work you bring together critique and care. When I got involved in making a strong critique of the university structure where I work, I actually turned to focus on governance issues and came to understand how critique as a form of practice it tied into critiques of governance, and that this critique of governance, of the self, and of others, constitutes what might be described as an ethical practice. And here of course my thinking follows both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. And here there's a real resonance with one of the central tenets of critical theory – self-reflection. So there's an ongoing balancing between criticality and carefulness with regard to the self, but also criticality and care in relationship you have to another. How far can social critique address problems that you see in the other? How much do you need to offer care to support and sustain another?

And when you start reading Michel Foucault's work towards the end of his life, in particular his essay called "self-writing"⁸, you get drawn into his interest in modes of self-regulation in different periods, but in particular how writing practices were part of self-regulation in the ancient Greek period. So, self-critique, reflecting on one's actions and weighing them up and trying to work out what kind of ethical value they might have is part of an act or practice of good caretaking of the self. And most recently, I've been fascinated by a genre of writing called auto theory,⁹ which is where autobiographical writing, or I would add, self-writing, and site-writing, gets understood as the production of theory. The work of Sara Ahmed or Maggie Nelson might be understood to be auto-theoretical¹⁰. And this type of writing ties back very strongly for me to the work of second-wave feminists, and to the earlier work of African American and women of colour writers Audre Lourde, Gloria Anzaldua and others who used autobiography to draw attention to the political dimensions of personal life.¹¹

Haraway in her *Staying with the Trouble*¹² book writes about the relation of autopoiesis and sympoiesis. It's probably important to distinguish auto-theory from autopoiesis, Haraway doesn't really do that, she talks of how in biological processes, auto-poiesis is a form of self-making, but sympoiesis is making with others.¹³ And that is an extremely important distinction to make that we need to apply to this political and ecological moment – that you can go so far on your own, but that's never going to be far enough; the changes that need to be made, can only be made with others. Sympoiesis offers a very interesting process for thinking with and working with, for making together. In Aristotle's triad,¹⁴ you have ideas, theory; action, practice; and making which is poiesis.

⁸ Foucault, 'Self Writing', translated from *Corps écrit* no 5 (February 1983), pp. 3–23. (See <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.hypomnemata.en/>, accessed 30 June 2020).

⁹ See for example Lauren Fournier, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 33, 3, (2018) and Stacey Young, *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*, (London: Routledge, 1997)., especially Chapter 3 on the history of feminist autotheory.

¹⁰ See for example, Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (Graywolf Press, 2015) and Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017).

¹¹ See Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera – The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, [1987] 1999). And Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', [1984] in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 2007),

¹² Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, pp. 2-3, and 33-4. Haraway is clear to reference her use of sympoiesis as stemming from Katie King's mention of M. Beth Dempster's MA thesis.

¹⁴ For a very good discussion of the relation of practice and poiesis in Aristotle's thought see R. Bousbaci and A Findeli, 'More acting and less making: A place for ethics in architecture's epistemology', *Design Philosophy Papers*, (2005) (4). They refer to the various

And so I realise, that in my earlier work around critical spatial practice I was more alert to the interplay of theory and practice, the interaction of ideas and action, and I was less alert to the process of making – of poiesis. In recent times, I've really been drawn to the poetic mode and how this works with criticality, because of the way poiesis draws attention to the making of writing, and in combining ethical and aesthetic elements.

Gilly Karjevsky: How would we position poiesis within the idea of disciplinarity? Do disciplines include all of these elements: ideas, theory, action, practices and making, poiesis, but defined within a certain catchment? Or do we absolutely need to undo discipline because it doesn't allow for ideas, theory, action, practice, and making, poiesis to penetrate this boundary, to be actualizing in the world?

Jane Rendell: I think it is to do with how disciplines characterize the relation between theory, practice and poiesis, and how institutional contexts might push disciplines to emphasis one of these aspects at the expense of another. If we take the discipline out of the institution, (if indeed we can!) and consider discipline in relation to practices of the self, we could link practices of self-making to what Foucault calls the 'mode of subjection the way in which one positions oneself in relation to the 'rule' and puts this positioning into practice. This is where the poesis also comes in as a form of self-making in relation to the 'substance' or material 'made over' by ethics. Foucault's work links ethics to poiesis because he considers how processes of making oneself take place in relation to oneself in response to social orders or codes.¹⁵ So I suppose that takes discipline away from subject specialisms and it into self-making processes in and of themselves, how these can be both practices of freedom, but also practices of self-control.

Gilly Karjevsky: It could also be a framing of the moment when a student or a disciple, as you said before, moves beyond the learning mode into the making mode, in order to discover their own freedom within the discipline. Freedom by making.

Jane Rendell: Yes, and that's certainly why I've moved much more towards ways of "making writing" when I teach theory rather than simply discussing ideas and writing 'about' them later, these days I am often facilitating sessions in such a way that students, or participants, come up with instructions, tasks, processes for writing through which the other participants can actively engage. This is in a pedagogic module called 'Site Writing',¹⁶ which is part of the MA in Situated Practice, and developed from my own site-writing work as a situated practice of criticism.¹⁷ Part of that process is certainly reading texts written by others, but also thinking of reading as a situated practice. So sometimes that reading takes place in a classroom setting, but often it will take place outdoors or in another site. The participants leading a session decide the most resonant place to read a text, which might allow us to read while moving, and they invite others to read together in different ways. At other times, a session might involve writing in direct response to sites and writing in response to texts that have been read in situ. The idea is to encourage people to think about *where* they are, as a situated spatial positioning of themselves in relation to the ideas they're reading about, in relation to the others that they're reading with and the writing that they themselves are doing in relation to their reading, which necessarily involves thinking about who

books which comprise Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* and his *Metaphysics* in particular, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, E, 1, 1025b, 20-25.

¹⁵ See 'Morality and Practice of the Self' in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure*, [1985] translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

¹⁶ See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/architecture/programmes/postgraduate/ma-situated-practice>.

¹⁷ Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, (London: IB Tauris, 2010) and <https://site-writing.co.uk/>

they are in a process of situated transformation. So writing plays different roles in relation to readings. Participants have a responsibility as an author, both to their subject, but also to their reader. We explore together different genres of writing and different modes of readership, and different participatory writing practices as well. And then for those who are working in a more transdisciplinary form of practice, the writing is often made in the expanded field - and could include spoken words, images, films, audio ... this year was more challenging site-wise because of COVID-19, so participants weren't able to be outside as much or to make physical books, so in the past this making of writing included performative pieces in situ, but this year more sound works and digital books were produced.

Most importantly, the class doesn't start with a student coming in as kind of an empty container to learn from a series of texts that I've set, it's much more about students arriving with their own project, and then absorbing the ideas and modes of writing introduced to them, but in relation to what is relevant for their own project. Often in history and theory seminars, the idea is that the essay is written at the end of the seminar series, once one has studied a particular course, let's say you take a class on medieval architecture for ten weeks, and at the end, you might write an essay about what you've learnt. Whereas Site-Writing puts forth different methodologies for situated criticism and situated writing, not only as critical forms of practice, but as creative modes, poetic modes. It's about taking the subjectivity of the researcher seriously as part of the making of the work. Probably the most striking thing that feminism has taught me is the importance of considering one's relationship to oneself and to others, and the whole notion from second wave feminism of 'the personal is political'. Rather than treating academic rigour as something that operates outside one's personal life or one's own modes of subjectivity, feminist research allows one to explore how one comes into contact with subject matters, methods, processes, and others. Using creative writing as a way to enrich architectural history in my mind doesn't take away from the rigour of the academic discipline. In that interaction between past and present, the historian is constantly making decisions about what matters or how one interprets material. And so I've always found it very strange, not to bring positionality and subjectivity into play strongly in the making of arguments, interpretations, intellectual work. For me, being clear about one's positionality is actually a form of being precise.

Gilly Karjevsky: You've said here that discipline could be actualised outside of the institution. Let's challenge for a moment the relationship of the academic discipline and the academic institution, not as a binary relation but an entangled co-making, specifically I think you challenge it through your own work. You are a maker of feminist pedagogy within an institution, very consciously working to alter the institution through your work as well, engaging with the processes of changing, updating, contextualising and relation-alising the institution and your own discipline within it.

Jane Rendell: Yes, I find it very interesting when you reflect back to me what I've said ... I like the idea of an entanglement between academic discipline and academic institution, for me I think it's about inventing disciplines that allow one to find alternative ways within and through the institution. It's probably worth detouring a little bit here into inter- and transdisciplinarity, because if one moves from the way in which one has disciplined oneself or been disciplined to construct knowledge into another mode, one becomes much more aware of the fact that knowledge is constructed through particular rules and codes and procedures. And it's possible to become more aware of the edges or limits of disciplinary knowledge. So the idea that there might be these different types of practice that exist on the edges or through and across disciplines, such critical spatial practice or site-writing, opens up spaces between disciplines and institutions. I think that's what critical spatial practice or site-writing do most successfully; is to do away with restricted methodologies and invite the contextual and the personal in, and to open up a methodology of

interpretation rather than a methodology that follows a protocol or pre-scripted process. Critical spatial practice or site-writing are intended to be guides, through a terrain across and in between disciplines, but they're not intended to be tools that restrict.

Actually this idea of the guide links to the work that I'm doing at the moment with my colleagues, David Roberts and Yael Padan on the Bartlett Ethics Commission, we were originally writing what we thought were protocols for practising ethics. So taking quite generic research methods - whether it's making images or interviewing people - and thinking-through the ethical implications in such methods. David originally came up with the really original idea of these protocols, as prompts of self-questioning and helping people through the process of making ethical decisions, but increasingly I've been very uncomfortable with calling them protocols because I don't think they are about "must-do's". So I've recently re-termed them 'guides' because that's what they are – each one is being authored by a person with a lot of experience who imagines themselves into the role of guide for another person, a reader, and who takes them through the different kinds of ethical dilemmas and pitfalls that they might encounter in research practice. So I think that distinction between a protocol and a guide is very important. And I think the pedagogue is, in a sense, a guide. It's a huge responsibility to be a teacher as a guide. But I find it an incredibly rewarding one. It's not just about offering guidance through discipline, but guidance through a way of living.

END OF EDIT -----

Jane Rendell is Professor of Critical Spatial Practice at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. An architectural historian, cultural critic and art writer, Rendell's research, writing and teaching is transdisciplinary and crosses architecture, art, feminism, history and psychoanalysis.

Gilly Karjevsky is an independent curator of Critical Spatial Practice.