

When site-writing becomes site-reading or how space matters through time

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My essay explores – briefly – how I evolved the term 'critical spatial practice' from my earlier introduction of it as a concept in 2003 to indicate an interest in the specifically spatial and critical aspects of interdisciplinary processes that operate between art and architecture, to my current practice of site-writing which performs acts of critical spatial practice through the writing of criticism, anticipating a space in which a writer might meet a reader.

My initial training is in architectural design, and my interest in spatial constructions has influenced the work that I have gone on to do, first as a feminist architectural historian studying the gendered spatial practice of the rambler in 1820's London, a precursor to the more famous Parisian flaneur, then as a theorist of critical spatial practice, and more recently as a site-writer.

My first introduction to site-specific practice was in 1996 when I was invited to Chelsea College of Art and Design in London to teach on and later direct their MA in the Theory and Practice of Public Art and Design. I quickly became fascinated by public art, by what seemed a highly unstable form of practice, which insisted on locating itself 'a place between' fine art and spatial design. Two years later when I was invited to guest edit a special issue of *The Public Art Journal*, I had become interested in examining the overlapping concerns of those artists and designers engaged in various forms of 'spatial practice' and the writings of cultural geographers and other cultural commentators and philosophers interested in 'spatial theory'.

In 2003 I came up with the term 'critical spatial practice' to describe projects located between art and architecture, and the standpoints theory offered for playing out disciplinary definitions. I developed this concept further in *Art and Architecture*, in which I examined a series of projects located between art and architecture – defined as critical spatial practices – since they both critiqued the sites into which they intervened as well as the disciplinary procedures through which they operated.¹ I argued that such projects operated at a triple crossroads: between theory and practice, between art and architecture, and between public and private, and I was keen to stress three particular qualities:

– the critical: I proposed that the definition of the term ‘critical’, taken from Frankfurt School critical theory, be extended to encompass practice – particularly those critical practices that involved self-reflection and the desire for social change, that sought to transform rather than to only describe.²

– the spatial: drawing on the work of Michael de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, I made a distinction between those strategies that aimed to maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders, and those tactics that sought to critique and question them, defining the latter as ‘critical spatial practices’.³

– the interdisciplinary: I was most interested in practices which desired to transgress the limits of their particular disciplinary procedures and to explore the interdisciplinary processes that operated in between them.

For Julia Kristeva the interdisciplinary is a ‘site where expressions of resistance are latent’, and where the methodologies that must be invented take place along a ‘diagonal axis’.⁴ Homi Bhabha has also described the encounter between disciplines in psychoanalytic terms as an ‘ambivalent movement between pedagogical and performative address’.⁵ It is precisely for this reason that I am a passionate advocate for interdisciplinarity; such work is not only critical and intellectual, but also emotional and political. In demanding that we exchange what we know for what we don’t know, and give up the safety of competence for the dangers of potential incompetence, the transformational experience of interdisciplinary work produces a potentially destabilising engagement with dominant power structures allowing the emergence of new and often uncertain forms of knowledge.

I found Edward Soja’s examination of the interrelation of the conceptual categories of space, time and social being,⁶ highly productive; reading his texts suggested to me that my understanding of critical spatial practice, in terms of the interdisciplinary place between art and architecture, needed to be understood through three distinct aspects: the spatial, the temporal and the social.

The focus on the spatial, entitled ‘Between Here and There’, investigated three particular issues:

first, the relationship between site and non-site as put forward by Robert Smithson;⁷ second, the potential for redefining Rosalind Krauss's notion of an 'expanded field' with respect to contemporary urban and explicitly interdisciplinary practice;⁸ and third, the possibility, following Michel de Certeau's notion of space as a practiced place, for creative interventions to transform places into spaces of social critique.

The focus on the temporal dimension, entitled, 'Between Now and Then', highlighted the relation of past, present and future in allegorical, montage and dialectical constructions and, through exploring the time of viewing and using art and architecture, sought to complicate the distinction often made between the allegorical experience as passive melancholia, and montage as active shock.⁹

Finally, the focus on the social, entitled, 'Between One and Another', examined the 'work' less as a set of 'things' or 'objects' and more as a series of exchanges that take place between people – subjects – through such processes as collaboration, social sculpture and walking.¹⁰

Art and Architecture aimed to reflect upon different kinds of critical spatial practice. From researching and writing the book, I discovered that my position with regard to the concepts and works I was studying emerged in response to my situated experiences of ideas and artefacts. I became increasingly intrigued by taking the act of criticism as a form of critical spatial practice, a writing practice which makes sites between work and critic, essay and reader; that remakes works in textual forms; and rather than write about sites, aims to write sites.

Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism, is a collection of essays and text-works, written between 1998 and 2008, which investigate the sites between critic and work, not only the material sites of production and reception of a work, but also those imagined and remembered, near and far.¹¹ *Site-Writing* is an attempt to explore a form of situated criticism, to investigate the position of the critic, not only in relation to art objects, architectural spaces and theoretical ideas, but through the site of writing itself.

My research took place in parallel to teaching an MA and PhD module on site-specific writing. I was interested in encouraging students at the Bartlett to bring their design skills to explore the

spatial structure of writing: to examine, for example, how the material, political and social qualities of a site might get transposed into a textual form, become reinserted into a site as a text installation, and might meet its reader through a performative event.

I think my attitude to writing is no doubt influenced by my early training as an architectural designer. I certainly think of writing as a creative response to a brief, and most of the writing in *Site-Writing*, was produced in response to particular invitations either to write or talk about particular works. The approach combines different kinds of response, from the critique of a brief, so those which are more intuitive, emotional, associative, dreamy, meandering, out of place. I have an interest in the design of writing, in the composition and arrangement of words in relation to one another, on a page, in a book, operating through devices which I consider to be spatial, such as voices, frames, returns, view-points ...

Site-Writing was not written at once, nor is it organised as a linear and sequential argument. I see the arrangement and re-working of the writings in relation to each other as a form of architecture. I decided to structure the book not into chapters but into spatial configurations, where in each, the writing aims to perform the spatial patterning suggested by the architectural conditions and psychic states discovered in the artworks: *Triangular Structures with Variable Thirds*, *Back and Forth*, *A Rearrangement of Words and Things*, *Déjà vu: That Which Keeps Coming Back*, *Decentering/Recentering*.

Drawing on Howard Caygill's notion of strategic critique, which shares with immanent critique the capacity for discovering or inventing the criteria of critical judgement in the course of criticism',¹² I suggest that with his/her responsibility to convey an experience of the work to another audience, the critic occupies a discrete position as mediator and that this *situatedness* conditions the performance of his/her interpretative role.¹³

Interested in how the spatial and often changing positions we occupy as critics – materially, conceptually, emotionally and ideologically – create conditions which make possible acts of interpretation and constructions of meaning, my practice of 'site-writing' operates in the interactive space between artist/designer and work, essay and reader. This is an active writing that constructs as well as traces the sites between critic, work and reader and in so doing

constructs an architecture of art criticism.

And so to end, I'd like to present a short site-writing which explores the interaction between writer and reader at the level of the macro and micro – cosmic and psychic – and how different spatial experiences and representations – text and image – real and imagined – come together when reading words and looking at images. One might think of this as a moment when site-writing becomes site-reading or how space matters through time.

Alien Positions

For their exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in 2006, artists Bik Van Der Pol displayed one of the oldest items in the museum's collection, a piece of rock brought back to earth from the moon in 1969 by the crew of the first manned lunar landing mission, Apollo 11, in an exhibition space where visitors could come and reflect on this alien object.¹⁴

In his remarkable essay, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche draws connections between astronomy and psychoanalysis, discussing the de-stabilizing affects of reversing the structures of relationships we take for granted socially, culturally and personally, from the macro-scale of the cosmos to the micro-scale of the psyche. Laplanche argues that the revolutionary move made by Copernicus in 1543, which demonstrated that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the reverse, can be paralleled to Freud's discovery of an unconscious whose existence de-stabilized the central position of the ego in the formation of the subject. In Laplanche's view Freud did not pay proper heed to the possibilities inherent in his discovery, and went astray: 'the wrong path was taken each time there was a return to a theory of self-centering'.¹⁵ This notion of going astray, Laplanche relates to astrology, describing how the word for planet derives from the verb *planao*, 'to lead astray, to seduce'.¹⁶

Laplanche writes of how the unconscious implanted in the subject by the enigmatic address of the other can be thought of as an internal foreign body: 'the unconscious as an alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien'.¹⁷

Alien Position One

Go to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Find the fragment of the moon on exhibition in the gallery.

Stand in front of it.

Think about where it comes from.

Contemplate its strangeness.

Consider its alien-ness.

Ask yourself this: 'Is this alien really outside me?'

Alien Position Two

Ask the gallery attendant for a copy of Jean Laplanche's *Essays on Otherness*.

Return to the fragment of the moon.

Draw up a chair and sit down facing the moon fragment.

Turn to page 52 of *Essays on Otherness* and start reading.

Read until you have completed 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution'.

Ask yourself this: 'How does the moon see me?'

Alien Position Three

Find out the date and time of next full moon.

Take up a position where you can watch the full moon rise.

Wait until the moon is at its zenith.

Turn to page XXX of this book.

You are looking at an image of the earth taken from the moon.

Lift the book to the night sky with the image of the earth facing you.

Position the image of the earth so that you can see the moon at the same time.

Hold the images of the earth and moon together and wait ...¹⁸

¹ I first introduced the term 'critical spatial practice' in my article Jane Rendell, 'A Place Between Art, Architecture and Critical Theory', *Proceedings to Place and Location* (Tallinn, Estonia: 2003) pp. 221-33 (published in English and Estonian) and later consolidated and developed as a concept in my book Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006). Since that time, the same term has been taken up by individuals such as Judith Rugg in her seminars at the RIBA, London, from around 2008; Eyal Weisman to describe activities as part of the 'MA:

Research Architecture' at Goldsmiths College of Art, London; and most recently by Marcus Miessen to identify the 'MA: Architecture and Critical Spatial Practice' launched in 2011 at the Städelschule, Frankfurt.

² Critical theory is a phrase that refers to the work of a group of theorists and philosophers called the Frankfurt School operating in the early twentieth century. The group includes Theodor Adorno, Jurgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Benjamin; and their writings are connected by their interest in the ideas of the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, the political economist Karl Marx, and the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Taken together, their work could be characterized as a rethinking or development of Marxist ideas in relation to the shifts in society, culture and economy that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century. See Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) and Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: an interview', Alex Coles and Alexia Defert, (eds), *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-*, v.2, (London: Blackdog Publishing, 1997), pp. 3-21, pp. 5-6.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 163. See also 'Translator Translated', (interview with cultural theorist Homi Bhabha) by W.J.T. Mitchell, *Artforum* v.33, n.7 (March 1995) pp. 80–84. COPYRIGHT Artforum International Magazine Inc. 1995
<http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/interview.html>. (accessed 2 September 2012).

⁶ See Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Expanding the Geographical Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

⁷ See Robert Smithson, "'Earth" (1969) Symposium at White Museum, Cornell University' and Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site' (1967), Jack Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

⁸ See Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985) pp. 31–42. This essay was originally published in *October* 8 (Spring 1979).

⁹ Walter Benjamin's clearest descriptions of his concept of the dialectical image can be found in Walter Benjamin, 'Materials for the Exposé of 1935', Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project (1927–39)* translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 911 and Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', [1940] translated by Harry Zohn, Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations* (London: Fontana) pp. 245–55, p. 254. While his study of allegory can be found in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, [1925] translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), his account of montage in film can be found in Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', [1936] translated by Harry Zohn, Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992) pp. 211–44, p. 231.

¹⁰ Here I refer to two much referenced contemporary texts Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, [1998] translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Presses du reel, 2002) and Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), but also made the link back to earlier feminist work in this field, for example, Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

¹¹ Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

¹² Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 34. See also p. 79.

¹³ For a discussion of the politics of spectatorship see for example, Umberto Eco, 'The Poetics of the Open Work', [1962] in Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press and the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2006) pp. 20–40 and Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005) p. 13 and p. 131. For texts which argue for the performativity of criticism see for example, Gavin Butt, 'Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism', Gavin Butt (ed.) *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) pp. 1–19 and Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson,

'Introduction', Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (eds) *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 1–10.

¹⁴ Bik Van Der Pol, *Fly Me To The Moon* (2005) Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. The project was commissioned by Het Mieuwe Rijksmuseum as part of the arts programme 'a contemporary view of the Rijksmuseum' during the renovation of the building. Bik Van Der Pol commissioned a range of writers – Jennifer Allen, Wouter Davidts, Frans Von der Dunk and myself – to respond to the moon rock. See Bik Van Der Pol, *Fly Me To The Moon* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum and Sternberg Press, 2006). See also <http://www.sternbergpress.com/index.php?pageId=1156&l=en&bookId=56&sort=year> (accessed 21 June 2008); <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/pers/tentoonstellingen/fly-me-the-moon?lang=en> (accessed 21 June 2008); and <http://www.bikvanderpol.net/> (accessed 21 June 2008).

¹⁵ Jean Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution' [1992] translated by Luke Thurston, in Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 52–83, p. 60.

¹⁶ Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', p. 54, footnote 6.

¹⁷ Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', p. 65.

¹⁸ A delightful twist to the tale: The Rijksmuseum's moon rock is a fake! Inherited from the estate of a former prime minister, when recently tested it was found to be a piece of petrified wood, possibly from Arizona. See for example http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/space/2009-09-14-moon-rock_N.htm (accessed 2 September 2012).