

*Seven Studies for 'A Holding', 23 March–31 May 2020*

Jane Rendell



The term 'holding' is used here to denote not only the actual physical holding of the infant, but also the total environmental provision prior to the concept of *living with*.<sup>1</sup>

*Seven Studies for 'A Holding', (23 March–31 May 2020)* engages with D. W. Winnicott's ideas of transitional spaces and 'living-with' and explores how relations of remoteness and proximity have been reconfigured through the COVID19 pandemic. I painted these watercolours of spring blossoms during the COVID19 'lockdown' in the UK in 2020, between the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March and the 31<sup>st</sup> of May. At home all the time, the days of the week, usually quite distinct, began to blend into one another. The end of each working day was marked by a UK Government announcement of the number of people who had passed away from COVID19 in the past 24 hours, producing an increasing running total. The titles pair the date I noticed a flower of this kind open for the first time, and the total number of deaths from COVID19 in the UK, as recorded on that same day.<sup>2</sup>

While I was painting spring blossoms, my partner artist David Cross, was putting together 'Get Better Soon: Planetary Health and Climate Emergency,' a talk in which he argues that COVID19 is a symptom of the ecological crisis.<sup>3</sup> Cross explains how the Stockholm Resilience Institute's 2009 paper identified 'nine planetary boundaries in the earth's system,' which 'define the safe operating space for humanity with respect to the Earth system and are associated with the planet's biophysical subsystems or processes'.<sup>4</sup> Beyond this, according to Katy Raworth, lie 'unacceptable environmental degradation and potential tipping points in earth systems'.<sup>5</sup> Raworth's 'doughnut' is a spatial concept that positions the nine planetary boundaries as an 'environmental ceiling', which she pairs with 'twelve dimensions of the social foundation ... derived from internationally agreed minimum social standards, as identified by the world's governments in the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.' For Raworth, 'between social and planetary boundaries lies an environmentally safe and socially just space in which humanity can thrive'. In my view, Raworth's 'doughnut' constitutes 'a holding'.



In other words, it refers to a three-dimensional or space relationship with time gradually added.<sup>6</sup>

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D. W. Winnicott's concept of a holding environment relates to his work on the caring environment that a parent (specifically in his work – a mother) creates for a child, and the supportive environment a therapist makes for a client.<sup>7</sup> A holding environment insulates the baby/client from stress, but also allows moments of frustration to enter. Gradually adjusting to the withdrawal of care as an immediate response to need, a holding environment allows the baby/client to develop creatively and to become self-sustaining. This transitional space between parent and child, analyst and analysand, exists as a resting place for the individual engaged in keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.<sup>8</sup> For Winnicott this is retained in later life in the area of intense experiencing that belongs to the arts, to religion, to imaginative living and to creative scientific work, providing relief from the strain of relating inner and outer reality. Winnicott discusses cultural experience as located in the 'potential space' between 'the individual and the environment (originally the object)'.<sup>9</sup>

Felix Guattari notes that 'in the transference there is virtually never any actual dual relation',<sup>10</sup> rather he argues that dual relations are always triangular in character, noting that 'there is always in a real situation a mediating object that acts as an ambiguous support or medium'.<sup>11</sup> As Gary Genosko points out, Guattari relies to a certain extent on both D. W. Winnicott's notion of the transitional object and potential space between mother and child as a third entity, but also Jacques Lacan's *object a*, as that which provokes the institution's desire. For Guattari, it is transdisciplinarity that holds the potential of radical critique, linked in his own philosophy to transversality, an 'unconscious source of action', that carries a group's desire, 'a dimension opposite and complementary to the structures that generate pyramidal hierarchisation'.<sup>12</sup>

When in the late spring of 2020 I was asked to contribute to the online portal [piramMMMida](#), a project which engages power, planet, and plague, curated by Denis Maksimov, Masha Mileeva, Michal Murawski and David Roberts, their invitation offered me the chance to position *Seven Studies for 'A Holding'*, (23 March–31 May 2020), such that the holding environment could be offered as both a critique and an alternative to pyramidal power structures.



This overlaps with, but is initiated prior to, instinctual experiences that in time would determine object relationships.<sup>13</sup>

In early March when COVID19 arrived in the UK I was on strike, as part of the University Colleges Union, our third strike in two years. This one, called *Four Fights* directly addressed the key issues impacting academic workers as a result of the marketization of the university sector, including pay, workload, equality and casualization.<sup>14</sup> On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the strike, Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, three days before it was due to end, I read an 'Open Letter to the Trade Union Movement' from *Labour Transformed*. This encouraged me to close our picket at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, as an act of social solidarity with the National Health Service, to help to 'flatten the peak' of the COVID19 pandemic. From transforming the pedagogy of my site-writing module into teachouts on the picket line, I moved over, that weekend, to teaching on line.

The multiple 'zooms of one's own', as my colleague Polly Gould liked to call them, that comprised our teaching sessions through the spring and summer of 2020, produced holding environments of a sort. These acts of holding were experimental spaces of pedagogical process which kept our site-writing class together when we had been scattered to the wind, made distant, yet not remote. In the zoom grid we found ourselves next to each other, in new ways, different each time. This process of reconfiguring our relations spatially created new proximities between us, transitional spaces that allowed our writings to flow in new spatial circuits – material and immaterial. The seminar participants curated their final works in an online exhibition – *Refracted Sites* – which launched in October 2020, around the time that the *Remote Practices* conference took place, also in zoom world.<sup>15</sup>

The question of how critical writing can respond to the spatial qualities of sites, is one which I began to explore through teaching back in 2001, when I set up a history and theory module called 'Site-Specific Writing' for architectural design graduate students at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Module participants were invited to approach their dissertations as forms of site-specific writing; to use their design skills to create spatial ways of writing and in so doing to dissolve boundaries, facilitating a transitional space between studio 'practice' and seminar 'thinking'.



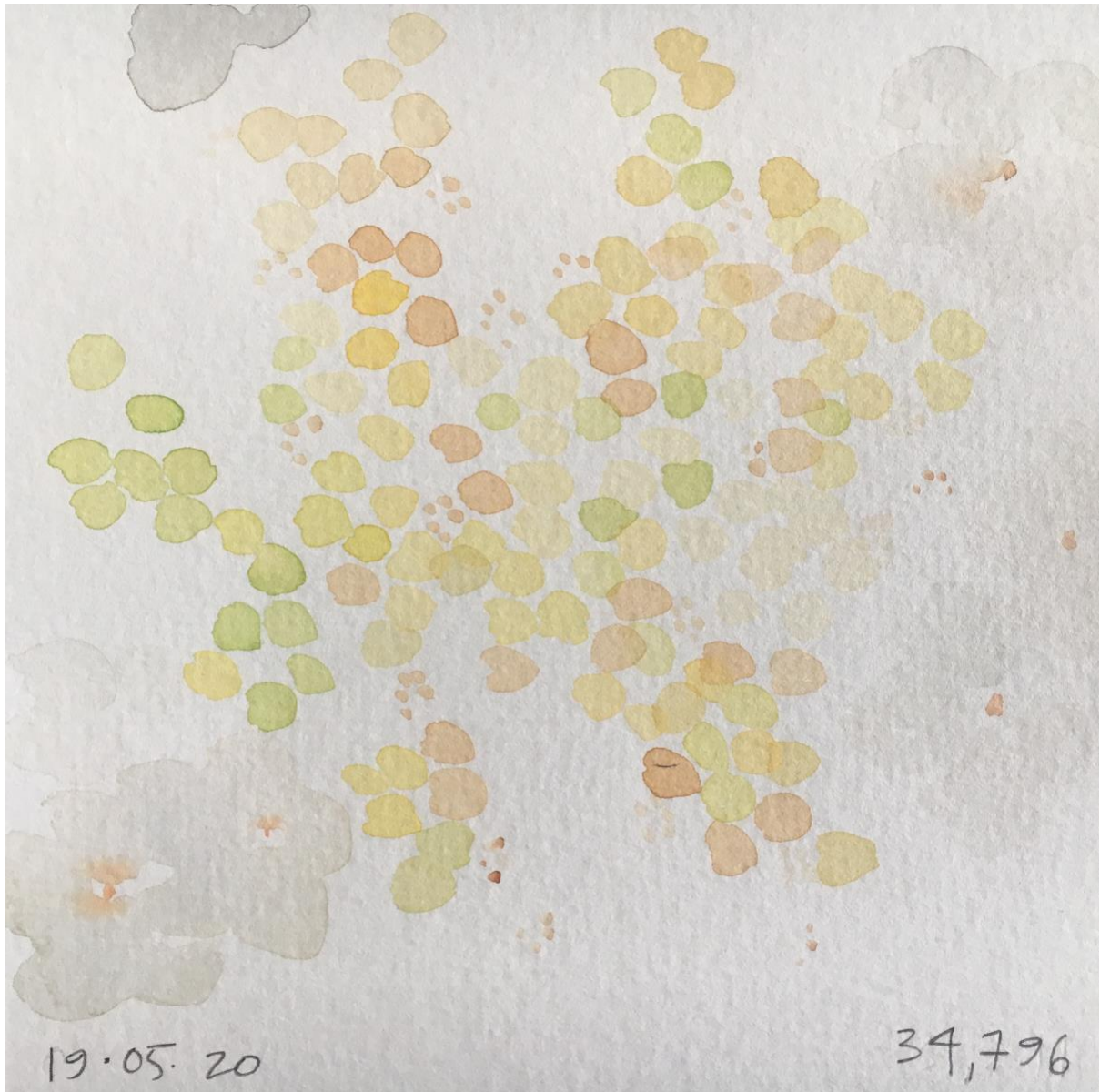


It includes the management of experiences that are inherent in existence, such as the *completion* (and therefore the *non-completion*) of processes, processes which from the outside may seem to be purely physiological but which belong to infant psychology and take place in a complex psychological field, determined by the awareness and the empathy of the mother.<sup>16</sup>



I painted the blossoms in spring, a transitional season, a shedding of winter and edging into summer. I found the buds as they were opening into flowers, in hedges that ran along the edge of my garden, and encircled the meadow I walked around each day to exercise. From ‘a place between’ to ‘spaces of transition’, much of my work as an architectural theorist, art critic and site-writer has engaged with the transitional spaces of edges and borders.<sup>17</sup> I have been fascinated by the relation between space and subjectivity, interior life and the exterior world, and especially their interweaving through life-writing. Twenty years ago, when I was writing my first architectural autobiography, ‘Undoing Architecture’,<sup>18</sup> I read French feminist philosophers, and the writing of women of colour from the 1980s – like bell hooks,<sup>19</sup> and Gloria Anzaldúa,<sup>20</sup> who showed me the role that writing one’s life can play in negotiating the transitional spaces each of us occupies in relation to others – architectural, human, animal, vegetal and other.

Interested in the writerly qualities of architectural criticism, and in the practice of writing architecturally – in how one could make architecture in words – led me to initiate ‘site-writing’, and to explore through research and pedagogy the ways in which critics perform their acts of interpretation through written and other languages.<sup>21</sup> Following Donna Haraway, I argued, that knowledge is situated,<sup>22</sup> that viewpoints are constructed and critical attitudes performed through writing one’s lived and located experiences. Experiments with how the material, social, cultural and political processes at work in a site – as well as through a site’s history – can be engaged with by the writer, and transposed into writing, consider afresh how one might write, rather than write about, site. Texts can be inserted back into sites, making spaces to encounter readers, and so rather like architecture, texts can inhabit sites but also be sites for inhabitation.



The term 'living with' implies object relationships, and the emergence of the infant from the state of being merged with the mother, or his perception of objects as external to the self.<sup>23</sup>

Site-writing draws attention to the situatedness of critical writing and the roles sites play in the way critics position themselves and perform their acts of interpretation of works to, for, and with others.<sup>24</sup> The desire to work with variations in voice to reflect and produce spatial distances and proximities between works and texts – and between artists, writers, and readers – culminated in *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*.<sup>25</sup> Considering the situatedness of criticism can take us from the sites through which a critic investigates a work – emotionally, intellectually, physically – to the ways in which a critical essay is published and meets its audience. This particular take on criticism as a situated practice encourages processes of interpretation to be understood as produced by, and productive of, the sites and situations from which they emerge and engender, as well as the ways in which they are performed through the very processes of criticizing.<sup>26</sup>

*The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Transitional Space*, performs the transitional possibilities the architectural social condenser and the psychoanalytic setting offer, through the spaces of the book itself, by inter-weaving two strands of academic enquiry – architectural and psychoanalytic – with a third more autobiographical one.<sup>27</sup> Working with graphic artist Marit Munzberg, each strand was set on a different paper stock, used a different version of the same font, and related image to text across the book's gutter in a different way. Quotes from one strand were situated in relation to images from another to form a transitional space in the mind of the reader, playing back and forth not only with recto-verso relations, but with more temporal twists to the narrative – what psychoanalyst André Green might describe as: 'the anticipatory event (*l'avant-coup*) and the retroactive attribution of new meaning (*l'après-coup*)'.<sup>28</sup>



This study is especially concerned with the 'holding' stage of maternal care, and with the complex events in infants' psychological development that are related to this holding phase.<sup>29</sup>

A number of qualities have emerged over time from my own site-writing practice and the work of my students: (i) how physical journeys through architectural spaces can interact with psychic states; (ii) how an intellectual journey can produce emotional transformations; (iii) how the dialogical relations between writing and designing can create hybrid genres; (iv) the potent spatial possibilities of image-text figurations; (v) the particular spatial and architectural qualities of storytelling; (vi) the use of narration to develop multiple voices and different subject positions; (vii) how responses to specific sites can pattern the form as well as the content of texts.<sup>30</sup> Site-writing practices can reconstitute relations between theory and practice, research and design, in existing architectural and urban methodologies, prioritizing the ethical qualities of interactions between subjects and sites.

A specific strand of feminist life-writing called 'autotheory' is described by Lauren Fournier as 'the practice[s] of engaging with theory, life, and art from the perspective of one's lived experiences,'<sup>31</sup> and located historically by Stacey Young in the writing feminist women of colour.<sup>32</sup> In re-working 'Undoing Architecture' recently I understood this time not only as a site-writing, but also an autotheory.<sup>33</sup> Both terms are perhaps prefigured by Michel Foucault's 'Self-Writing', an essay from 1983, in which he explores how the involvement of writing practices in processes of self-formation gives them an '*ethopoietic* function'.<sup>34</sup> The relation between the poetic and the ethical, has been described by poet Joan Retallack as 'poethical',<sup>35</sup> and developed more recently by Denise Ferreira Da Silva through her 'black feminist poethics'.<sup>36</sup> When Donna Haraway reconceptualises the Anthropocene as the Chthulucene,<sup>37</sup> in *Staying with the Trouble*, she notes, taking the term sympoiesis from M. Beth Dempster, that this epoch in which the human and nonhuman are inextricably linked is sympoietic and not autopoietic. Writing that mortal worlds 'do not make themselves',<sup>38</sup> but rather require a poiesis that thinks-with, makes-with and becomes-with, she calls this SF – 'science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far.'<sup>39</sup>





It should be remembered, however, that a division of one phase from another is artificial, and merely a matter of convenience, adopted for the purpose of clearer definition.<sup>40</sup>



Citational practices are ways of making-with: the acts of referencing and quoting those whose writing inspires us creates sites where our words can sit alongside each other.<sup>41</sup> These transitional spaces of citation have the potential to draw to attention the edges between selves and others through processes that musicians might understand in terms of ‘featuring’, the inclusion of another’s voice in one’s work, or ‘remixing’, when one’s work is reconfigured by another.

Recently I have begun a practice of curating (featuring or remixing, I’m not sure?) works of critical spatial practice and site-writings, and set up *Reading Writing Quarterly*, as a site to foreground ‘reviewing’ as a situated practice.<sup>42</sup> Each solstice and equinox I invite writers to swap recently completed works and to provide a situated ‘review’ of each other’s text – these ‘reviews’ take textual, visual, sonic, filmic, performative forms. These dialogic exchanges open up ways of ‘reading writing’ differently, generating multiple modes of engagement with words, experimenting with the genre of the ‘critical review essay’, to create something far more relational.

This work emerges out of my interests in the relational practices at the heart of discussions around architectural and urban ethics.<sup>43</sup> Understanding ethics as a practice of relating one to another ties back to my early argument (from 1996) that feminist architectural history is a form of practice, through which a subject relates to her objects.<sup>44</sup> Yet despite collaborating with others on multiple institutional and intellectual projects, in the form of co-edited and curated books, symposia, and exhibitions, over the past 25 years, I have tended to see site-writing as a sole-authored activity – a place of refuge and retreat from my professional life. But at the time of *Remote Practices* while working on a site-writing called *Selvedges*, I decided to invite participants of the site-writing seminar to insert their own writings into my text, which acted as a holding device.<sup>45</sup> Who knows ... was it the social isolation of COVID19 that prompted me to reconfigure site-writing as collaborative endeavour – spatial remoteness posing a need for textual proximity?

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' (1960), *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1965), 37-55, 43-4.

<sup>2</sup> [https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-deaths-covid-19?country=GBR~OWID\\_WRL](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/total-deaths-covid-19?country=GBR~OWID_WRL)

<sup>3</sup> <https://vimeo.com/418970216>

<sup>4</sup> J. Rockström, W. Steffen, K. Noone, *et al.* 'A safe operating space for humanity,' *Nature*, (2009) 461, 472–475.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/461472a>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

<sup>6</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' 43-4.

<sup>7</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' 37-55

<sup>8</sup> D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 34 (1953), 89–97.

<sup>9</sup> D. W. Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 48 (1967) 368–372, 317.

<sup>10</sup> Félix Guattari, 'The Transference' [1964], Gary Genosko (ed.), *The Guattari Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 61-68, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Guattari, 'The Transference', 63.

<sup>12</sup> Félix Guattari, 'Transversality' [1964], Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), 11-23, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' 43-4.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.s-t-r-i-k-e.org/>. See also 'After the Strike? 'Part 1: The Transitional Space of the Picket Line,' and 'Part 2: Solidarity In and Out', Igea Troiani and Claudia Dutton (eds) special issue of *Architecture and Culture* (2021), Volume 9, Issue 1, *Space to Think: The Contested Architectures of Higher Education*. DOI: [10.1080/20507828.2021.1827481](https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2021.1827481)

<sup>15</sup> <https://refracted sites2020.cargo.site/>

<sup>16</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' 43-4.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006) and Jane Rendell, *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition* (London: IB Tauris, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> See Jane Rendell, 'Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse,' in *Occupying Architecture* ed. Jonathan Hill (London: Routledge, 1998), 229–46. Revised as Jane Rendell, 'Undoing Architecture', republished 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).

<sup>19</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, (Boston: South End Press, 1984). See also bell hooks, *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround Press, 1989), 145–53.

<sup>20</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera – The New Mestiza* [1987] (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999). See also Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Persephone Press: 1981).

<sup>21</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Architecture-writing,' *The Journal of Architecture*, (2005) 10:3, 255-264, DOI: [10.1080/13602360500162451](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360500162451). See also Jane Rendell, 'Architecture-Writing' and 'Site-Writing: Enigma and Embellishment,' in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (London: Routledge, 2007).

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<sup>22</sup> Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1988): 575–99.

<sup>23</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' 43-4.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Site-Writing,' in *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, v. 4, eds. Sharon Kivland, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Emma Cocker (Sheffield Hallam University and Site Gallery, 2005), 169–76.

<sup>25</sup> See Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB Tauris, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Sites, Situations, and other kinds of Situatedness,' in *Expanded Modes of Practice*, Special Issue of *Log* 48, ed. Bryony Roberts (2020).

<sup>27</sup> Jane Rendell, *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition* (London: IB Tauris, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> André Green, *Time in Psychoanalysis: Some Contradictory Aspects*, translated by Andrew Weller, (London: Free Association Books, 2002), 36.

<sup>29</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' pp. 43-4.

<sup>30</sup> See Jane Rendell, 'The Siting of Writing, and the Writing of Sites', Matthew Carmona (ed) *Explorations in Urban Design: An Urban Design Research Primer* (London: Ashgate, 2013). See also Jane Rendell, 'A Way with Words: Feminists Writing Architectural Design Research', Murray Fraser (ed) *Architectural Design Research* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Lauren Fournier, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice,' *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, (2018), 33:3, 643.

<sup>32</sup> Stacey Young, *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (London: Routledge, 1997). See chapter 3 on the history of feminist autotheory.

<sup>33</sup> Jane Rendell, 'A life of its own', Matthew Butcher and Megan O'Shea, *Emerging Architectural Research 2009-2018* (London: UCL Press, 2020)

<sup>34</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Self Writing,' translated from *Corps écrit*, no. 5 (February 1983): 3–23. See <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.hypomnemata.en/>

<sup>35</sup> Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Denise Ferreira Da Silva, 'Toward a Black Feminist Poethics,' *The Black Scholar*, 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

<sup>37</sup> 'Chthulucene Manifesto from Santa Cruz,' revised from 'Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe in Conversation,' *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). See <https://laboratoryplanet.org/en/manifeste-chthulucene-de-santa-cruz/>.

<sup>38</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016): 33.

<sup>39</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' pp. 43-4.

<sup>41</sup> Jane Rendell, 'From, In and With Anne Tallentire,' in *Becoming a Feminist Architect*, special issue of *Field*, 7 (2017), eds, Karin Reisinger and Meike Schalk: 13-33. <http://field-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2-Jane-Rendell-From-in-and-with-Anne-Tallentire.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> See <https://site-writing.co.uk/>; <https://criticalspatialpractice.co.uk/>; and <https://site-writing.co.uk/rw/>.

<sup>43</sup> See Jane Rendell, 'Postscript: From Critical to Ethical Spatial Practice', Susannah Dickinson, Aletheia Ida and Jonathan Bean, (eds), *The Unexamined, Critical Practices in Architecture and Place-Making* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020) and

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Jane Rendell, 'Hotspots and Touchstones: From Critical to Ethical Spatial Practice', Lorens Holm and Cameron McEwan (eds) special issue on *Architecture and Culture, Architecture and Collective Life*, (2020)  
DOI: [10.1080/20507828.2020.1792107](https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2020.1792107)

<sup>44</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Subjective Space: an Architectural History of the Burlington Arcade', Duncan McCorquodale, Katerina Ruedi and Sarah Wigglesworth (eds) *Desiring Practices* (London: Blackdog Publishing, 1996), pp. 216–33.

<sup>45</sup> See Jane Rendell, '[Marginal modes: Positions-of-architecture-writing](https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/marginal-modes-positions-of-architecture-writing)', *The Architectural Review*. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/marginal-modes-positions-of-architecture-writing> (2020), for the first sole-authored work, and 'Selvedges', Carolyn Strauss (ed), *Slow Spatial Research: Chronicles of Radical Affection* (Valiz, forthcoming 2021) which features the voices of others.