

The Subject of *this* Object

Jane Rendell

... architectural work is performed by people who shape and are shaped by their labor. As such, the essays emphasize work as a function of subjectivity. In starting with architectural labor-as-design essays and moving to those of architecture-as-institutionalized-labor, it pulls design-oriented readers into realms that might initially seem 'too professional' but actually speak to their personal everyday lives.

In this afterword, I aim to exit this book, as near as possible, to where its author began, with 'Detail: The Subject of the Object'. This was the title of the first essay, here called 'Craft and Design', when it was first published in 2000. It is the only essay in this book to have been written prior to 2014, and it is an important one, because it sets out – prefigures – by some time, a project that has quite clearly occupied Deamer's thought and being in these intervening years, and about which she has continued to write sometime after that anticipatory essay.

I've started to think recently that perhaps we only have one issue in us, something that appears as a kind of symptom, that works away at us, and that drives us to act, to work, to write. Throughout our lives we find ourselves returning to it, a psychoanalyst might call this an acting out and working through. Back we come, again and again, in ways that are sometimes different, often disguised, where we catch ourselves by surprise when we realise we are there again at that subject (or is it an object?) from yet another angle, in which it is sometimes barely recognisable. And interestingly this relation of symptom to drive, which came to mind, having read Deamer's book proposal, appeared a little later in her psychoanalytic reading of two kinds of parametricism.

So the phrase – 'Detail: The Subject of the Object' – taken from the first essay's original title, will be my guide to reading Deamer's book – *this* object – back to you – (one of) its subjects. This object has many subjects: its author certainly, an erudite, insightful academic and an activist committed to an equitable architectural practice; but its subject matter too, which focuses – critically and propositionally – on the organisation of architectural work and labour from a theoretical, historical, practical and professional perspective – a subject of vital importance to students, educators and designers alike. It is also an object those subjects work and labour in the making of architecture – planners, developers, construction workers, service engineers, landscapers not to mention the occupants and maintenance staff who come after a building's completion. And then there are the

subjects who have helped produce the object itself, this book, from the co-authors, to colleagues and students at the office and in the university, to those at the publishing house and the printing or digital press, to the original editors and convenors who invited these essays from Deamer in the first place. And finally there is us – me, then you, and after you, the reading subjects of the future, and the subjects those readings are yet to produce.

This object is bound into an economy then of relational subjects, interconnected in processes of production and reproduction. From here – from the perspective of a reading of a finally worked-through object – I would like to remember the work and labour required to write this book, as well as imagine the work and labour that a reading of it demands. But rather than focus directly on its subject matter, to either salute the essays or critically analyse them, I would rather respond to this object's reverberations, to reflect on those themes that this author's work and labour have produced.

Writing involves work and labour; any writer knows and feels that, just as any reader knows and feels the work and labour of reading – of allowing ideas to enter you, the effort of grasping them, and then the care with which you must safely store them, in places you can find them again later. Writing is a practice both material and immaterial, that involves thinking, choosing words and putting them together in ways which make sense on printed as well as digital pages. The writing we do as university workers often gets called research. Some tend to think such writing is done briefly, and just once, something that happens at the end of a long research process when all the thinking and working out has already been done. The 'writing-up' of a doctorate (a term borrowed from the sciences) suggests a neat and swift wrapping up, rather than a labour that attends to, and continuously works over, an object, from which we might depart, and then come back to, a working again at something, to see if it might work out differently this time.

This book object is a such a work that has been worked at, and then re-worked over time. If you read carefully, you can find how it bears the traces of its previous incarnations – as talks and as articles – the work of preparing scripts for lectures, the labour of staying up late (too late) to do so; the work of drafting journal articles and getting the footnotes right, the labour that makes your back hurt as you re-write that sentence yet again, to really make sure you are getting the sense of it across. And most recently, for Deamer, the author subject, the working up of those original transcripts into a series of essays arranged as a chronology, and put together finally as a book – this object.

I often read such objects from the back, or dip into them in the middle, anywhere in fact, attracted like a magpie by bright things – ideas that promise to elucidate projects that I might be currently working on. But this time I read steadily from start to finish, one essay after another, fascinated to see where Deamer would take her project next. And I say, quite specifically, *where* Deamer would take her project, not where her project would take her, for despite the fact that this book has been written over nearly 20 years, a time frame in which most of us might lose track, become enticed by a different glimmer, take a new path, this is not the case here, Deamer remains in charge of this project – its intention and its energy – from start to finish.

The object produced by that subject and her project, has left a strong impression on this subject. It has impressed upon me a strategic plan, partly hidden at first, but coming into view, devised by a mind with a purpose that doesn't falter, although it finds different ways of working towards its goal. Deamer's object is one of deep commitment, a focus and a passion for what architecture should and could be – if only it would address its relation to work and labour. This reorientation is what the object is all about, and why Deamer describes it as 'a call to arms, not a mere report'. But it is more than that, as well as an analysis of a problem, this object is also a design for a plan of action, one that intends to get us somewhere else, with all the work we know that will involve. And so with a plan like that it really is the work of a true architect, and a labour of love!

The call to arms – the plan to activate – adds action to work and to labour as part of architectural production and reproduction. I think it is helpful therefore to consider the distinction Hannah Arendt draws between labour, work and action in *The Human Condition*. In which, according to Arendt, labour corresponds to the biological life of humans and animals, work to the artificial processes of artefact fabrication, and where action – and its connection to speech – is for Arendt the central political activity.¹ With this distinction in mind we can begin to tease apart the various strands of Deamer's project from analysis to action through her various modes of work and labour.

Writing more recently Nancy Fraser has pointed to the hidden aspects of Marx's account of capitalist production, what she calls the 'background "conditions of possibility" for exploitation'. She sees this move from foreground to background in the 'epistemic shift from production to social reproduction – the forms of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds.' And she notes how these forms of reproductive labour are described as 'care', 'affective labour' or 'subjectivation', as the activities that form 'capitalism's human subjects', 'sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings'.²

Acknowledging the difference between work as production and labour as biological life as Arendt does, and the division of production and reproduction across the public sphere and the private sphere as Fraser does, is important to draw out of Deamer's analysis, because it places attention on the gendered aspect of her work, and allows a link to be made with the areas of feminist activism that Deamer has been engaged in for quite some time. Deamer's life as an activist – her work, her labour and her actions – including founding The Architecture Lobby, strongly inform her intellectual endeavours and require recognising as a strong stream of activity that informs her thinking in this book. In other words, this is not a book born out of deskwork only, it has also required groundwork, and some serious leg, arm and voice work – as an image in the book of Deamer on the street, protest megaphone in hand, attests.

Regarding groundwork, in the first essay, Deamer lays out this out – she introduces us to her critical and analytic take on a history of architectural and cultural theory that deals with the work and labour of producing cultural artefacts. This is the important, pain-staking work of a serious academic, going over the key texts, pinpointing the relevant concepts, setting out a conceptual framework that will allow her to launch an argument. At the end of the article, she refers to philosopher of technology, Peter Caw's, request for a "praxology" of technology, – 'an examination which is not a philosophy of technology but an analysis of the practices within technology'. Deamer argues that:

Such a praxology would allow us see the details of architecture for what they actually are, and from there, appreciate their overdetermined and deeply social essence. This in turn would allow us to reread both the subject and object of architecture. This article is a step in instigating such a practice in the discourse of architecture.

For Deamer, a rereading of both the subject and object of architecture, involves a study of, in her own words, 'not *what* architects produce, but *how*'. [my emphasis]

When she picks up on these themes – of work, labour, technology, production in architectural practice – although the subject is the same, and maybe the object too, her approach to the pitching of an argument – the *how* of her own work – has changed I feel. The next four essays written between 2014 and 2016, all deal with work and labour, but there is something more of the practitioner about them, and less the theorist. First, a close-up account of what is involved in architectural labour and work, and architects' denial of this. Second, a Kleinian analysis that explores

the differences between the subjects and objects of two types of parametric practice – ‘form-driven scripting’ and ‘intelligence management’ or BIM. Third, a critical history that traces the shift from a capitalist economy based on production to one of consumption and its implications for architectural work – namely the disappearance of object-making as the ‘goal of architectural labour’ and the recognition of ‘the delivery of knowledge (as opposed to the delivery of an object) as our area of expertise’. And fourth, a sustained examination of the relation between immaterial labour and the knowledge economy.

And then the object breaks and the work of reading really begins. ‘Bear with this, please!’, Deamer writes, as she takes me through a grindingly detailed analysis of Antitrust laws in the United States and their implications for the architectural profession. A real work-out, as reading goes, but having written a similarly technical piece myself recently on Compulsory Purchase Orders, I sensed there was a reason for this, that it had to be done, and that perhaps I had it coming to me anyway. I started to wonder how the rest of the book was going to pan out, but I need not have worried, as the chapter turned out to be an oddity as far as the kind of reading work it had involved. It also stood out as a distinct moment in the arc of the book’s narrative, marking a cusp in the movement of the argument. The need to take the reader in deep, very deep, had been engineered by its author, it seems, in order to get us out somewhere a lot brighter.

The absolute American faith in competition that is codified in antitrust law is worth contemplating. Where did it come from? Is it the case that our forefathers so equated democracy with competition that it is a constitutional foundation? And more to heart of this architectural inquiry, how did the AIA, beyond antitrust directive, respond so easily to competition’s siren?

From this point on, the book shifts in tone, critical analysis is now complemented by propositions. The incisive and structured analysis of problems, a hallmark of Deamer’s style of thought, I realise, becomes supplemented with clear-headed suggestions for what needs to be done and why. She draws an even line here, between critique and proposition, not an easy balance to maintain. On the one hand, her faith in what might be steers her away from the abyss and what could, in another author’s work, be considered negative critique. On the other hand, her practical outlook regarding the future, recalibrates any sense of a utopian dreaming that might lead her to go beyond what would be possible.

In these next six essays, Deamer takes us through these possibilities: first, unionised labour for architecture; second, a reconfiguring of the values of the AIA, the architectural professional body in the US, through The Architecture Lobby whose purpose is ‘an area of debate’; and third, a careful comparison with the architectural profession and working conditions in France, Germany and Sweden. The last three chapters sketch out the detail of what an alternative ordering of work and labour within a newly defined architectural practice (possibly deprofessionalised) might look like. A different form of contract law – IPB (Integrated Project Delivery) – based on relations; is followed by a setting out of variously scaled and positioned cooperative models – consumer, producer, worker, and municipal – and a discussion of what this could mean for architectural practice. Here Deamer notes ‘how cooperative work undermines the classic liberal distinction between the private and the public’, and touches on the point that I raised via Fraser earlier, that ‘the fundamental labor of reproduction that allows society to maintain and transform itself — includ[es] labors of care and cultural transmission’.

The book ends with an object lesson – a beautifully articulated proposal for an architectural practice informed by the critical insights of radical democracy as set out by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau,³ operating schematically at the scale of the geopolitics, the institution, and the subject. The rejection of architecture as a ‘job’, and the call for its reassessment as work and labour, are argued to ‘stretch[es] our subjectivity beyond mere self-indulgence or ineffective agency while integrating this subjectivity into a social network both collaborative and mutually rewarding’. The emergence of an explicit conceptualisation of subjectivity is timely, as we near the book’s end, as it articulates an ethical aspect of Deamer’s practice that she is quieter about – processes of self-making, or as Michel Foucault might describe them, techniques of subjectivation, which I feel are at work here.⁴

It is fascinating to note, that these last two papers are co-authored, the first with Aaron Cayer, Shawhin Roudbari, Manuel Shvartzberg, and the second just with Shvartzberg. They pulse with an interesting energy, possibly a result of dialogue and collaboration, but also possibly an intergenerational exchange, where Deamer’s experience – her political commitment, astute reasoning and strategic focus – is combined with the perspective of a Marxism revisioned. This co-authoring gives shape to a possible new mode of agency, of working, labouring and acting together: self-made subjects with different objects? As Deamer and Shvartzberg write:

Adopting this position in architecture today means not only becoming more politically activist, but also expanding our notions of labor to go beyond the ideological discourses of

managerial entrepreneurialism — attempting to see structures of feeling and production, once again.

¹ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

² Nancy Fraser, 'Behind Marx's Hidden Abode', *New Left Review*, 86, (March-April 2014) and Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care', *New Left Review*, 100, (July-August 2016).

³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

⁴ Foucault describes 'the *mode of subjection (mode d'assujettissement)*' in terms of 'the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice'. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault outlined a framework for analysing the 'history of ethical problematizations based on practices of the self'. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, volume 2, The Use of Pleasure*, [1985] translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 26. It is important to distinguish subjectivation from subjection in Foucault's work. 'The history of the subject, from the perspective of the practices of the self and the procedures of subjectivation, is completely separate from the project, formulated in the 1970s, of the history of the production of subjectivities, of the procedures of subjection by the machines of power.' See Frédéric Gros, 'Le souci de soi chez Michel Foucault, A review of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, (2005), 31 (5-6), pp. 697-708, p. 698. Clive Barnett also argues that in Foucault's later work, subjectivity is not subjection, but rather a mode of subjectivation – he writes, 'Foucault formally articulated the notion of problematization as the object of a program of research on practices through which people wilfully take aspects of their own selves to be the material of ethical concern. See Clive Barnett, 'On Problematization: Elaborations on a Theme in "Late Foucault"', *nonsite.org*, issue 16, p. 16. See also the work of Judith Butler who engages closely with formation of the ethical subject in Foucault and what he calls in *The Use of Pleasure* 'modes of subjectivation' or 'practices of the self'. See Judith Butler, *Giving An Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 21.