Living With

Jane Rendell

This book has many beginnings. One of those is Jonathan Orlek's doctoral thesis,[1] which documented the embedded ethnographic research that took place during his residency (in and out of) in East Street Art's *Artist House 45*, and theorised this as critical spatial practice.[2] Yet there are other issues that prompted the work, for example, the UK housing crisis. This book responds to these multiple starting points, individual and social, but also suggesting possible future trajectories. For me, reading Jon's thesis the first time around it seemed important to publish such a multifaceted work in a manner that fully reflected its open ethos. This book does just that; building on the participatory form of the research and practice, and involving as many of those who were part of his residency as possible. The publication is collaborative, right through to the structure and design, including how the words and images speak to each other.

When I first engaged with Jon's practice, I was starting to think about Donald Winnicott's notion of 'living with' and all the joys and tensions of co-habitation. I was living with my Mum at the time, and getting used to a range of different daily rituals around the home, some of which felt especially strange, as we were in the second COVID-19 lockdown, and grieving the loss of my Dad. Mourning as I came to experience it, is a discontinuous process, as are acts of domestic labour, reproduction, and caring; continuous as the lives they support, discontinuous as the ways in which they are always about-to-be-interrupted, because they are not considered important enough to command sufficient space and time.

Discontinuous thinking takes place in fragments. In what he calls 'figures' in a *Lover's Discourse*, and then later 'traits' in *How to Live Together,* Roland Barthes explores ways of co-existing or living together in fragments. *How to Live Together*, comprising translated transcripts of his lecture course at the Collège de France, is itself configured as a series of discontinuous units, what Barthes calls traits: 'clearly bound up with a certain politics …'. This he describes as 'A politics that seeks to deconstruct metalanguage,'[3] and one which allows him to concentrate on indirect relations, to deviate from following a path, and to 'present … findings as we go along.' [4]

Presenting findings as we go along …

Today, asI read Jon's work again, this time with all the findings of his residency presented with other voices and reconfigured into this polyvocal publication, I am less caught up with the fragmentation of living-with, in all its modes and moods of melancholy, and more able to enjoy the creative possibilities and insights gained by sharing fragments of his patient open practice. Winnicott is, as far as I know, the one who came up with the concept of 'living with.' It emerged connected to his work on holding and on the caring environment that a parent (specifically in his work – a mother) creates for a child, and the supportive environment an analyst makes for an analysand.[5] For Winnicott, a holding environment insulates a baby or analysand 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 is what allows the baby or analysand to develop creatively and to become self-sustaining. This environment, or what Winnicott also calls a 'transitional space' between parent and child or analyst and analysand, exists as a resting place for the individual engaged in keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.[6] In Winnicott's work transitional space 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. He discusses how cultural experience is located in the 'potential space' between 'the individual and the environment (originally the object)':[7]

> 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.[8]

For Winnicott, conceptualising the experience of 'living with' intimately connects to the caring practice of holding:

> The term 'holding'… denote[s] not only the actual physical holding of the infant, but also the total environmental provision prior to the concept of *living with.*[9]

This idea that environmental provision might exist prior to the concept of living with suggests not just the interconnectedness of physical and lived space, but also the importance of imagining, when designing housing, the possibilities of co-habitation and the emotional importance of home as a meeting place. In the late 1990s, I was working on the development of *Strangely Familiar*, an exhibition of stories of unexpected spaces in the city, that I had co-curated with Iain Borden, Jo Kerr and Alicia Pivaro, into a book, *The Unknown City.* When I approached bell hooks to write an essay,

she wondered how her cultural thinking on feminism and race could best inform architecture and urbanism.

> The city was too strange to enchant me. I lost my way there. Home as I understood it was a place where I would never be lost. [10]

And so we talked about the places where we had lived and what they meant to us. She wrote a beautiful essay 'City Living: Love's Meeting Place,' addressing how when she made her first home in New York City, she anticipated the arrival and presence of others, showing how home-making relates to the construction of inter- and intra-subjectivities.

> Outside on city streets, I am less a stranger for I am always coming home to a place where love is – a peaceful sanctuary where I come back to myself.[11]

hooks' engagement with architecture focused often on the possibilities of imagining life differently through the process of living with others, writing: 'it is our capacity to imagine that lets us move beyond boundaries'.[12]

The need to relate the imaginative possibilities for housing provision to practices of living is an issue directly addressed by John Turner in the 1970s, when he described housing not just as a noun but as a verb:

> In English, the word 'housing' can be used as a noun or as a verb. When used as a noun, housing describes a *commodity* or product. The verb 'to house' describes the process or *activity* of housing. While the idea of housing as a collective noun is obviously associated with housing activities, the word itself does not generally indicate this fact. On the other hand, the activity of housing is difficult to conceive without including the houses promoted, built, or used.[13]

This idea of housing as verb has been reactivated more recently in an in-depth theoretical discussion by Camillo Boano and Giovanna Astolfo, who move the discussion on from distinctions between housing as noun and as verb, or even as house and as home, to the varying possibilities of housing as a verb in connection to the term inhabitation and its various European linguistic roots in habiter, habitat, and habitus.[14] They draw on Henri Lefebvre and 'Lefebvre-inspired scholarship,' to

differentiate between habitat (habitat) and inhabiting (habiter), noting how, 'While habitat is defined as a container of living functions (eating, sleeping, working), habiter is conceived as the everyday practice of social space production that occurs outside coercive planning systems.' They continue to suggest how, 'habiter, or inhabitance, is that which will always overflow, and it is often translated as living,' and how this is described by Chris Butler as a 'politics of inhabitance.' For Boano and Astolfo, 'Inhabiting is a condition whose fundamental aspect is relationality,' and not only do they suggest that these interactions 'happen not only between humans, but also between humans and non-humans,' but following Georgio Agamben, Rosi Braidotti and Roberto Esposito, they focus on the affirmative aspects of 'forms-of-life' and inhabitation:

> Particularly, we can envision three key characteristics of an affirmative life: the capacity to care and to connect, the capacity to repair, endure and hold together, as well as to imagine and experiment with alternatives as antagonistic potentials of life-forces to oppose the politics of oppression and capitalist extraction of values. [15]

> Understanding the affirmative dimension of inhabitation as a resistance to the biopolitics of housing allows us to develop enduring, affirmative relations of subjects that tenaciously respond non-negatively to aspects of life and to modes of living and extractive practices and construct different horizons of hope [16]

This affirmative theorising around the critical possibilities of inhabiting offers a theoretical parallel to the hopeful lived experiments that artists have conducted in so many ways around housing, from artists making their own homes into artworks, as Kirsty Bell describes in *The Artist's House: From Workplace to Artwork*,[17] to artists choosing to inhabit space in different ways, which I engaged with in 'Undoing architecture.'[18] Choosing to live differently out of choice, does not engage the same ethical urgencies or questions of social and spatial justice as providing housing for those who are precarious, including those displaced – refugees and victims of disaster and war – but it can show us how we might begin to imagine other humane possibilities. Artists who conduct experiments in housing as forms of 'critical spatial practice'[19] do so by problematising norms, but also by offering ways of living, inhabiting perhaps, the questions of life differently. Perhaps it is this dual potential, which Gerald Raunig conceptualised via his term 'instituent critique' that inspires both Jon and I.[20]

In fine art, debates around the critical often engage with Marcel Duchamp's questioning of the aesthetic criteria used to categorize and position objects as art. A strand of conceptual practice,

developed through the work of artists such as Hans Haacke and Michael Asher in the 1960s and 1970s, was later described by critic Benjamin Buchloh as 'institutional critique'.[21] More recently Slovenian artist Apolonija Šušteršic suggested that this kind of work 'doesn't produce any constructive resolution, when it doesn't effect changes in our political and cultural structures'.[22] Her comment was made in conversation with the curator Maria Lind, who put forward the idea of 'constructive institutional critique' to describe the work of Šušteršic and others, which, rather than being 'based on negativity', in her view:

> offer[s] a proposal for change, possibly an improvement, or a test of how to do things slightly differently … based on dialogue between the artist and the institution, rather than an inherent conflict.[23]

This expressed preference for dialogue rather than negativity and conflict in critical fine art, suggests a more productive way of adopting a critical stance, one that stands not so much in opposition but by offering an alternative range of outcomes.

In Gerald Raunig's writings on 'instituent critique,' he refers closely to Michel Foucault's lectures on *parrhesia*, as a practice of 'truth-telling' or speaking truth to power, that we might today call 'whistle-blowing.' [24] Raunig draws out the possibilities of what he calls 'a double strategy,' which involves the performance of both political and personal *parrhesia* to achieve institutional and social critique. For Raunig practicing *parrhesia* requires continuously re-balancing actions of involvement and distancing. He writes:

> What is needed, therefore, are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions, and the institution, their own-being institution.[25]

This double strategy offers the artist the possibility of configuring a practice that is both able to critique institutional structures, and to offer something more and beyond. This is particularly relevant for artists who locate their work inside specific institutional structures, like artists on a placement, a mode of practice which has found contemporary significance in revisiting the important contribution of the Artists Placement Group,[26] and the artists they placed in industrial companies and public sector workplaces during the 1970s. Considering artists' residencies as a practice of

instituent critique allows us to think about not only how artists work inside institutional structures, but also what it means to reside there, and that when and where an institution becomes a residence, this involves practices of inhabitation and/or living with.

In my own work, I've drawn on the potential of instituent critique as a double strategy for performing critical and creative spatial practice to better understand the relation between 'Taking Work Home,' where parrhesic actions taken in the academic institution as work-place infringe on life at home, to 'Making Home Work,' where the legal arrangements of leasehold structure domestic life producing unwanted displacements of inhabitation.[27] Jon in the meantime has been exploring the potential of instituent critique for practitioners who are embedded researchers within artist-led organisations, including not-for-profit organisations, founded and collectively run by artists. His work considers the possibilities offered by embedded ethnography for artist-led research, responding to the distinctions made by Valerie Jenness between embedded ethnographic research and embedded approaches within journalism.[28]

Something quite particular happens when an artist is in residence in a house managed by an artist-led organisation, and when that house is part of an experimental research project into housing itself. In a case such as this, the practice of housing and of being resident – of inhabitation – gets put under scrutiny, and it becomes clear that living-with means not only living-with others and living-with oneself, but living-with the very practice of reflecting of what it means to live-with. This potential for critical and ongoing reflection on practices of inhabitation and living-with is precisely why embedded research into artist-led housing can offer something different to other forms of housing research and practice. Despite restrictions, an artistic form of research aims to find the freedom of imagination necessary to really question practices of living-with and the necessary housing structures and process to support this. It is this combination of questioning what is and imagining what might be that artists can offer the theorisation and practice of housing provision, and the design of places to live together – houses, homes, habitats, and inhabitations.

This book not only describes what East Street Arts has done with *Artist House 45*, but also opens up Jon's inhabitation of *Artist House 45*, making his conversations with others public.. With contributions from those who have occupied different points of view and roles, tracing distinct passages through and out of *Artist House 45*, this collaborative book is composed of many voices, making it possible to reflect on this East Street Art project, and to make those reflections relevant beyond East Street Arts. As Jon said to me, you can't do the 'with' as a single practitioner or author, it

has to happen *with* others. Publishing a book together, like this, offers one way of sharing the values of ethical housing practice, and of living with.

---

[1] Jonathan Orlek, 'Moving in and Out, or Staying in Bed: Using Multiple Ethnographic Positions and Methods to tudy Artist-led Housing as a Critical Spatial Practice,' (Doctoral thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2021).

[2] Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London: IB Tauris, 2006).

[3] Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of some Everyday Spaces*, Notes for a Lecture course and seminar at the Collège de France (1976-7) translated by Kate Briggs, (Colombia University Press, [2002] 2013), p. 20.

[4] Barthes, *How to Live Together,* p. 133.

[5] D. W. Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' *The Maturational 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, [1960] 1965), pp. 37-55.

[6] 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.

[7] D. W. Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 48, (1967) pp. 368–72, 317.

[8] Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' pp. 43-4.

[9] Winnicott, 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,' pp. 43-4.

[10] bell hooks, 'City Living: Love's Meeting Place,' Iain Borden, Jane Rendell, Joe Kerr with Alicia Pivaro (eds) *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001). See also Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Alicia Pivaro and Jane Rendell (eds) *Strangely Familiar: Narratives of Architecture in the City* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[11] bell hooks, 'City Living: Love's Meeting Place.'

[12] 'Epilogue,' bell hooks, Julie Eizenberg and Hank Koning, excerpts from 'House, 20 June 1994,' *Assemblage,* 24 (1995), in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (eds) *Gender, Space, Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[13] John F. C. Turner, 'Housing as a verb,' John F. C. Turner, and Robert Fichter (eds) *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process*, (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 148-75.

[14] Camillo Boano and Giovanna Astolfo, 'Inhabitation as More-than-dwelling: Notes for a Renewed Grammar,' *International Journal of Housing Policy*, v. 20, n. 4, (2020) pp. 555-77.

[15] Boano and Astolfo, 'Inhabitation as More-than-dwelling.'

[16] Boano and Astolfo, 'Inhabitation as More-than-dwelling.'

[17] Kristen Bell, *The Artist's House: From Workplace to Artwork* (Sternberg Press, 2013).

[18] Jane Rendell, 'Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse', Jonathan Hill (ed) *Occupying Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 229-46. See also Jane Rendell, 'A life of its own,',Matthew Butcher and Megan O'Shea (eds) *Emerging Architectural Research 2009-2018* (London: UCL Press, 2020).

[19] Rendell, *Art and Architecture.*

[20] Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*, edited by J. Pearson (1999). Six Lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, October–November 1983, https://foucault.info/parrhesia/, accessed 18 March 2024.

[21] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh identifies the work of certain artists after 1966 as 'institutional critique'. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,' *October*, v. 55, (Winter 1990) pp. 105-43.

[22] 'Conversation between Maria Lind and Apolonija Šušteršič', *Apolonija Šušteršič, Moderna Museet Projekt*, *4.2–14.3.1999',* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet Projekt, 1999) pp. 41-57, p. 56.

[23] 'Conversation between Maria Lind and Apolonija Šušteršič', p. 56

[24] Foucault, *Discourse and Truth.*

[25] Gerald Raunig, 'Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming,' translated by Aileen Derieg (January 2006), http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en, accessed 18 March 2024.. See also Gerald Raunig, 'The Double Criticism of Parrhesia: Answering the Question "What is a Progressive (Art) Institution?"' translated by Aileen Derieg (April 2004), https://transversal.at/transversal/0504/raunig/en, accessed 18 March 2024.

[26] See for example, https://www.tate.org.uk/artistplacementgroup/, accessed 4 March 2024.

[27] Jane Rendell, 'Critical Spatial Practice as *Parrhesia',* special issue of *MaHKUscript*, *Journal of Fine Art Research* (2016); Jane Rendell, 'Activating Home and Work', Sandra Loschke (ed) *Rethinking Architectural Production: Between Experience, Action and Critique,* (London: Routledge, 2019) and Jane Rendell, 'Silver: Self/Site-Writing a Courthouse Drama,' Shauna Janssen and Anja Lindelof (eds) *Performing Institutions: Contested Sites and Structures of Care* (Intellect Books, 2024).

[28] See Jonathan Orlek, 'Embedded Ethnography as Instituent Practice within Artist-led Organisations,' unpublished paper. Orlek refers to Valeria Jenness, 'Pluto, Prisons, and Plaintiffs: Notes on Systematic Back-Translation from an Embedded Researcher,' *Social Problems* v. 55, n. 1 (2008), pp. 1-22.