

Responding to what the World needs Now

Sarah Stevens and Charlotte Erckrath interview Jane Rendell

Our exploration of Liminalities increasingly drew us towards Jane Rendell's amazing work. Jane is a researcher and writer with a transdisciplinary practice that crosses architecture, art, feminism, history and psychoanalysis and is based at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London, in the position of Professor of Critical Practice. Her evolution of *Site-Writing* has been such an inspiration for us as it has been for so many others. It was therefore a real privilege to have the opportunity to speak with Jane about her work. The transcript of our conversation is shared below.

Our grateful thanks to Jane for all her time and care for this project (8th May 2024).

Sarah Stevens (SS): *Within this issue of the Journal we are exploring the implications of an embracing of our entangled nature on our designerly practices. The notion of situatedness strongly links into this discussion. Could you say something about your practice and the roots of site-writing?*

Jane Rendell (JR): Thank you very much for inviting me, and for setting up this liminalities theme in such an exploratory way, in the form of a conversation between us. Taking an approach which asks questions and seeks to 'find out' immediately gets us into the heart of why and how we do things.

For me, site writing has roots in research but also, probably even more strongly, in pedagogy. In the mid 1990s I was invited to teach a masters course at Chelsea College of Art and Design, which I later ended up leading, called The Theory and Practice of Public Art and Design. It was quite a small

course, two years part-time, with 12 students per year from very different disciplinary backgrounds; from public policy, to landscape, to fine art, to design, to ceramics, to glassmaking, so often coming out of a training that was very materials-based. Psychoanalyst and artist Faye Carey had originally set up the course, and Malcolm Miles, a public art theorist, had joined and invited me in, and there were other amazing colleagues – architect Julia Dwyer, public artist Sue Ridge, and Katherine Clarke from muf architecture art – teaching on it. We were thinking about public art less as defined by materials, which is how it had traditionally been taught, and more akin to a conceptual site-specific approach. Through our shared teaching we began to redefine the practice of public art, and I started thinking about interdisciplinary practice and the relationship between different kinds of spatial practice and spatial theory.

I became really interested in the interdisciplinary possibilities of practices that intervene into specific sites in order to not just critique them, but to try and transform them. I came to call this 'critical spatial practice.' With my colleague Rex Henry, who was interested in spatial dialectics, we co-edited the second issue of the *Public Art Journal*, and our aim was to work across spatial theory and practice. We commissioned theoretical writings from geographers like Steve Pile, and sociologists like Paul Sweetman who was researching tattoos at the time, as well as a whole range of practitioners, for example, muf wrote a piece around their practice. The editorial and design approach we took was really interdisciplinary, and from there I started thinking about writing a book on the topic. This became *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* and was published in 2006 with I. B. Tauris. The book's aim was to think through what 'critical spatial practice' might be by exploring lots of different examples.

I took the idea of 'criticality' from Frankfurt School 'critical theory,' an approach to theoretical

thinking that embraces both self-reflectivity and also the desire for social transformation and emancipation. I wanted to move that idea of criticality from theory into practice. As I started to write about the artworks and designs that became the case studies in *Art and Architecture*.

I started to realise that the act of criticism or of critically and theoretically reflecting on an artwork or work of architecture was itself a form of critical spatial practice. Writing was a way of intervening into situations, to respond to them, and then to perform that interpretive response to another audience. I started to think about criticism as a form of situated practice, and that's what really inspired me to come up with the idea of 'site-writing' as a kind of situated writing or criticism.

Site-Writing was published by I. B. Tauris in 2010, and was, in a way, a sequel to *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. The book was commissioned within the publisher's art list which is why the subtitle of *Site-Writing* is *The Architecture of Art Criticism*. The book focused on the spatialization or the situatedness of art criticism, and took concepts from criticism, like critical distance, and rethought them from a material rather than an abstract spatial perspective. *Site-Writing* aimed to not just to think about criticality as analytic, interpretive and intellectual, but also to consider criticality as a spatially and materially positioned practice, engaging with emotion and affect. Howard Caygill's work on speculative criticism, for example, was really important for developing the idea that criticism emerges from the very process of criticizing; and I wanted to emphasise how criticism happens through a spatialised practice of engagement with an art work. Another key influence was the work of Isobel Armstrong, a literary critic, whose book *The Radical Aesthetic* looks at the difference between analytic and affective criticism. Her approach really helped me think about how different modes of criticism might depend upon positionality.

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You can see how site-writing began within my pedagogic practice, and became developed through my research as a distinct methodology for critical writing. It fed into my pedagogy again, but differently, when I moved back into teaching architecture at Nottingham and then at the Bartlett. At the start, I brought the 'site-writing' way of teaching into professional practice courses where I was working with architecture students who were often brilliant makers, but sometimes didn't really want to write or felt under confident in their writing. So I began to teach my theory seminars more as a mode of practice, asking people to bring in objects and write in response to those objects. I was doing some creative writing workshops myself at the time, so I tried to develop those techniques to bridge architectural theory and practice, whilst also aiming to bring the students' amazing making skills into the space of the seminar and to use such skills, like drawing and film-making, alongside writing.

The module I taught had many different names. I think the first time I taught it, the module was

called 'Site-Specific Writing,' then 'Travel Stories,' and then 'The Reading Room.' 'The Reading Room' was all about imagining and making books as spatial artefacts, and thinking about how the reader, and where and how they might read. For 'Site-Specific Writing' I asked students to make a piece of writing that would intervene into a space, and to think about the particularity of the book as artefact and how it might be responded to spatially. I remember how Chee Kit Lai, now an amazing colleague, made this brilliant book which was designed to be read on a journey, a return flight, I think it was to New York and back. The book would take exactly the length of that flight, out and back, to read and was designed to fit into a particular pocket of the airline seat and so on.

I then redeveloped the module for the MA Architectural History as 'Theorizing Practices: Practicing Theory.' Here the pedagogical focus was much more on the different genres of writing that architectural historians who wanted to be more experimental in their writing practice might want to create. The module now sits within

a new masters called Situated Practice that I co-wrote with James O'Leary. I think that the MA Situated Practice is a really nice place for this module to be, because it sits alongside modules in filmmaking and in participatory practice, so it really embraces situated writing as practice. Some of the students find their poetic voice, other students who are perhaps less confident in English, but who are often very talented makers, create these incredible book artefacts. One recent example is this amazing book that uses what's called 'dragon binding,' which looks like the scales of a dragon. It is really very beautiful (see Fig.1). We now have this treasure trove of artefacts – showcasing all these really inventive ways of book-making.

It's important to say that, although to start with this was very much my module, one that I invented and set up based on my own research and practice, over the last say 10 years I've taught it with Polly Gould, David Roberts, and also Sarah Butler. Polly is an artist and curator and she's really pushed the curatorial aspect of site-writing pedagogy, including a recent exhibition, that

we co-curated, called *Site-Writing: Arranging the Archive* at the Building Centre in London (2024) (see Fig.2). David Roberts is an urbanist and participatory practitioner who focuses on participatory writing, and Sarah Butler is a fiction author and also the curator of *Urban Words* where she has curated prose and fiction for public spaces. So over time the Site-Writing module has become much more diverse in terms of the interests that the different tutors have.

What it means to teach site-writing in an architecture school is something that has also evolved over time. When I first started teaching it, some students in architectural history were really nervous, because developing creative writing methods wasn't seen as properly academic, but that anxiety has now gone. I think a lot of things have changed, the coming of age of practice-led research in the UK in particular has changed academia, and there is now a whole amazing body of work from practitioners and PhD students that is understood as creative practice or practice-led research. I think this has opened a more confident phase

of experimentation for academic writing, where people are much more confident about exploring writing as a creative practice in the space of academia. So that's changed the mood of the pedagogy and people are now quite hungry to try things out.

Charlotte Erckrath (CE): *The engagement with place and production of the text has such an entangled relationship in the process of site-writing. Could you reflect on this?*

JR: That's a really nice question. My interest in site-writing was partially inspired by the art critic David Carrier's idea of 'art writing.' In his 1987 book *Art Writing and in Writing about Visual Art* (2003) he makes the argument that in the literature of art it's impossible to absolutely separate, or entirely distinguish, the arguments of an art writer from the literary structures used to present the arguments. I was really interested in developing that point from a spatial and architectural perspective. I wanted to explore how such a position could apply to the literature of architecture and to the literary

structures used to present architectural arguments, and also to look at how the structures of writing used to present argumentation are spatial and architectural – at the architectonics of writing, or what Mary Ann Caws has called 'architexture.'

Spatiality is present in writing in many different ways, some concern the spatiality of language and grammar, and others the spatial and material possibilities of textuality. Some of my inspiration comes from traditions like Oulipo: Workshop for Potential Literature, that included people like Italo Calvino, Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau. Much of their work constructs spatial texts using different kinds of constraints, and moves away from linear structures in argument and in writing. Maybe due to my architectural training I have always been really interested in how one might construct an argument spatially, not just in a sequence of chapters and also in how one can borrow from a site or space in order to structure an argument. This could mean spatially structuring an argument, but also spatially composing and designing



Fig.1 - Wuyue Huang, Herb Archives (2023), *Site-Writing: Arranging the Archive*, co-curated by Polly Gould and Jane Rendell, The Building Centre, London (25 March-25 April 2024). Photograph: Olga Kott.



Fig.2 - *Site-Writing: Arranging the Archive*, co-curated by Polly Gould and Jane Rendell, The Building Centre, London (25 March-25 April 2024). Photograph: Jane Rendell.

an essay or book, from considering how the words are spatially arranged on a page, to how those pages are collected together and bound, to how a book is opened or a piece of writing read. The spatial possibilities of writing can also be extended into an expanded field of installation, film and sound. Artists like Janet Cardiff, Caroline Bergvall and Ronnie Horn are really key inspirations as their writing crosses verbal and visual registers. There is also this possibility, which I think can sometimes be the hardest one to grasp, but that also holds most experimental potential for site-writing, which is – how can you remake a site in writing?

In art criticism there is the tradition of ekphrasis, which responds to an artwork in writing. This is a similar kind of process, but here the focus is on responding to the spatial composition of a site in writing. Whatever one person decides to recognise as an important spatial aspect of a site will be different from what another person will focus on. For example, even here, in our zoom room, we've got the possibilities to do this. Behind you is that beautiful vertical wooden panelling, or behind me this arrangement of images and books; to make a site-writing in response, you could take that spatial quality and use that to construct a writing. But I'm not talking here just about a formal analogy, my argument is that whatever you choose to focus on, that is your interpretive response to a site, and so it has a critical reasoning behind it. If we were all doing a site-writing workshop in the same room, each one of us would pick something different to focus on spatially, and so this takes interpretation as a hermeneutic strategy and spatialises it: what spatial aspect of a site is picked out in an interpretation and how does that become important in making a site-writing. So in a way site-writing is about making a translation from physical space to written space, and performing this translation for another audience, for a reader. It's that transformation from site to text and all the processes – interpretive and performative – that one goes through that I call 'site-writing.'

There is another aspect to site-writing worth drawing out in terms of place and production of text that concerns notions of situatedness and positionality, which perhaps when I first started working on this weren't as prevalent as concepts for critical writing as they are now. Donna Haraway had written her feminist piece around situated knowledge in the late 80s – 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988) – but it wasn't fully picked up by other disciplines until the mid to late 1990s, with people like Gillian Rose working within postmodern feminism and geography exploring the relationship between space and subjectivity. So those ideas of situated knowledge and positioned objectivity that Haraway writes about became even more important to feminist postmodernism in the 1990s. And by now, in the 2020s, other disciplines such as ethnography and social geography have highly developed discourses around positionality. In the 'site-writing' class we read the work of ethnographer D. Soyini Madison that has a lot of resonance with site-writing. For Madison, critical ethnography is about taking seriously the positionality of the writer, in terms of their ethical relation to site, and their accountability to audience, and to other research participants. So I'd say that situatedness and positionality have become, through feminism and other critical discourses, core academic intellectual concepts, that are really important to mobilize through the practice of site-writing, whether it's through my own work, or when I'm supporting the work of bachelor, masters or PhD students. Each person's individual position relates always to another's. I think relationality is very important to consider from a spatial perspective – so I like to underscore the importance of thinking about spatial relations.

CE: *Could you say something about these concerns in terms of feminist architectural writing?*

JR: That's a really fascinating

question for me and thinking about this brings to mind my deeper history. When I studied architecture for my degree at Sheffield in the late 1980s, from 1985 to 1988, I did my dissertation on feminist architectural space. At the time in architecture there were only two published books, at least that I could find, Susana Torre's *Women in American Architecture* (1977), and Doris Cole's *From Tipi to Skyscraper* (1973). So I started looking across at other disciplines to see what was out there and came across feminist anthropologists like Shirley Ardener and her book *Women and Space* (1981). There was other work in the field that seemed to advocate an essentialist feminist position, that I didn't really agree with – that women might design labyrinthine spaces while men might design pyramidal structures – and that's what I took issue with in my dissertation. I became interested in Aldo Van Eyck's work, particularly his Moederhuis, Mother's House, which I'd visited on a field trip to Amsterdam, and his idea of in-between realms. More recently, I have realised that interest in-between realms runs through into pretty much all of my work from the place between in *Art and Architecture*, to the hyphen in *Site-Writing*, where the hyphen as a potential space mediates the relation between site and writing. And then in *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition* I look at the spaces of relation between subjects and objects. I think for me it's that relational and spatial aspect to feminist theory that I'm really fascinated by and how this can inform the design of space.

In the early 1990s I worked at Matrix as a feminist architectural designer, and during that period I realised I wanted to learn more about feminist history and theory. So I went back to college and did a Masters in Architectural History. It was through developing an understanding of historiography as a critical methodology that I started thinking about how feminism could offer a critique of the often heterosexist and patriarchal methodologies of architectural

history. I became interested in how feminism could allow people to think critically about their objects of study: how we choose what we study, how we place value on some objects and not others, and how we value our interpretive methods and writing modes in different ways.

For my PhD I used the work of the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, and her essay from the late 1970s, translated into English as, 'Women on the Market,' to produce a gendered critique of spaces of consumption in 1820s London. This then became *The Pursuit of Pleasure* which was my first authored book. At the time I started to think much more about 'feminine' styles of writing, not in terms of the positioning of all women's writing as 'feminine,' but rather in asking what was a feminist voice or feminine voice in architecture. I had lots of conversations with feminist colleagues about this, such as Doina Petrescu; and Barbara Penner, Iain Borden and I co-edited *Gender Space Architecture* together in 2000 to bring together a set of core texts published across disciplines that investigated the relation of feminism and architecture, gender and space. At the same time I was also thinking about critical spatial practice and situated practice through my teaching at Chelsea, and wondering whether one could write academic essays in a different way, and what would happen if one used the 'I.' To suggest such a thing seems far less dramatic now, 30 years on, although in some cultures and places it's still considered quite transgressive to use 'I' in an academic essay. I was really inspired by bell hooks and Jennifer Bloomer's work – both use autobiography to great effect in their writing. And so I wrote this piece called *(Un)doing It Yourself* for a book that the late Jonathan Hill was editing called *Occupying Architecture*. That was where I first brought autobiography into my own writing, and used the 'I', my 'I', along with other voices. It broke the spell of the mantra: 'this essay will...,' and allowed me to say instead, 'I will ...' to give myself permission to write for myself. I think feminism has been really important for bringing subjectivity

into play in writing, academic and other kinds of writing, allowing people to be self-reflective, to expose their ways of working, and of thinking. Writing from the place of the 'I' or from the position of several 'I's, can expose of the mess of the academic essay in process, showing that not everything has been sorted out in advance. And it is through sharing this process of finding out what you think that the really important part of working out what an argument might be can take place.

So feminism has been key to my own work in terms of presenting to me the possibilities of feminist autobiography in the 1990s, and especially the writing of women of colour, like Gloria Anzaldúa, and now, in this amazing period, what is known as 'autotheory,' which has for many people almost replaced autobiography, taking its potential for self-making even further. Autotheory is not just life writing or writing from the position of 'I,' even though such positions can be multiple, it's also about the way in which writing life's experience can also generate theory. Sara Ahmed has this beautiful idea of the 'sweaty concept' which she writes about in *Living a Feminist Life*. Here writing about a challenging experience allows her to generate concepts.

For me this is really exciting, this possibility of the coming together of autobiography and autotheory to generate abstract concepts out of concrete singular experiences. So feminist autotheory is not about disappearing into a purely subjective experiential space. Of course work of that sort has amazing value, often cathartic value and transformational value for the development of a writer as a subject. But I think autotheoretical writing can also make a huge contribution to philosophy and to theory-building in architecture.

SS: *Fragments play a key role in some of the work, could you reflect on this?*

JR: I think this question picks up on the idea of multiple voices and the possibility that in autobiography, a feminist acknowledgement of the subject position isn't necessarily singular but can be multiple. I've been interested for some time in the idea of the 'confessional construction,' which is something I came up with in an early invited piece in 2002 for artist Bridget McLeer and the project she was curating called *llaw*, where she asked a number of writers and artists to produce a text to go on a wall in Hoxton, London outside the Bookartbookshop (see Fig.3).



Fig.3 - Jane Rendell, *Confessional Construction* (2002), *LLAW*, curated by Bridget McLeer, BookArtBookShop, London (2002). Photograph: Jane Rendell.

This invitation got me thinking about the movement from the private space of writing, to what happens when that writing is visibly made public as a kind of poster manifestation on a street, and how different this position is from a writing set on a page inside a book. It was in that piece that I started thinking about the confession as a making public of an autobiography, and that the act of revealing something of oneself might also be a construction of oneself or a performance. At the time I was really interested in Tracey Emin's work where she uses the act of the personal confessional as a kind of shock tactic, and also Sophie Calle's work where in her art practice she appears to be telling you stories that are very intimate, but in so doing she's also inventing an intricate set of persona – possibly real, possibly fictional.

Through the writing of the 'Confessional Construction' (2002), I became fascinated by the possibilities of intertwining multiple stories, imaginative and remembered. Much of my work has included the weaving of multiple voices. In one text, I might have three or four different voices on the go at the same time. Some voices might be theoretical, some might be gathered from found texts, some might be voices of other people, some will be my own. I think the idea of how a text can be woven is certainly what *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis* explores. The book has an autobiographical strand, a theoretical and psychoanalytic strand, and an architectural history strand, each one is quite strong throughout the book. Each strand has a different timeframe, so each story is told at a different tempo, and the book produces quite a complex temporality. Other shorter pieces, are composed of smaller phrases of writing that almost become fragments.

I've been interested in the process of arranging and rearranging fragments for some time so there has always been a curatorial aspect to my site-writing practice. When I wrote the BA Architecture dissertation that I mentioned earlier

it was before computers. The text was handwritten and then cut up and reassembled on the floor of my room, stapled and sellotaped, that's how I put it together. I think that process has probably stayed with me. I don't know if you would share this experience, but I do think architectural training makes us into spatial thinkers and writers. As architects we are less linear thinkers, and more spatial in our approach. So as someone trained as an architect, who then became a historian, a discipline which is often understood to be a sequential mode of argumentation, in which reflections on the past are remade in the present, I've been always really interested in how to relate spatiality and chronology. I think the fragment allows a creative possibility for the interrelating space and time.

I'm a real fan of Roland Barthes' work, particularly the way that he composes his writing out of fragments, like his *A Lovers Discourse* and his *The Preparation for a Novel*, as well as the other lectures he gave at the College de France. Barthes writes a lot about how working with fragments allows for a kind of non-linear approach, that he considers quite aleatory. In 2005, the artist Tacita Dean curated this amazing show called *An Aside*, where the curatorial concept was 'free association.' This exhibition has been another inspiration for me, as I'm interested in the process of free association in psychoanalytic practice, and how things that are next to each other, might not have a causal relationship. So for me theories and practices of montage and collage are really relevant, how things might sit alongside each other in one configuration, and if you move one thing and put it somewhere else the overall meaning will change. This practice of arranging and rearranging configurations allows multiple possibilities of interpretation to occur. I've loved working with the fragment for that reason, as an incomplete part that does not contain a whole and full meaning on its own, and that wants to be part of an arrangement, and whose interpretation remains open.

There's perhaps a melancholy about the fragment that really appeals to me. This is obviously not the same for everyone, but I find melancholy and also nostalgia offer strong creative possibilities. I lost my Dad several years ago and it took a very long time to get anywhere near recovering from losing him. He'd left behind books he was reading on a bookcase with the bookmarks he used left in them, and I took fragments from the pages he'd marked to construct a text. I found writing that piece, 'After he had gone,' a really healing process. So for me there's something about the melancholy of the fragment, the piece that's torn apart from being a whole thing, that has a creative and poetic potential that I just find generative. Maybe there is something there about the need to balance death with life.

SS: *When the work enters other spaces, through readings or quiet readings, are there further entanglements, do the texts have future lives? The vocal act of reading would seem important, could you say something about this?*

JR: I like the idea that a text is never finished. We all face deadlines and particular moments where we have to bring things to a close, or maybe a pause, but I always like revisiting and reworking something that I thought was finished, only to discover it has more to offer. Again I think there's something about the architectural training here that is relevant. As a student I used to find the idea of the greenfield site, the tabula rasa, absolutely terrifying; whereas the site that was already full of things, was, and still is, I find, much more exciting to work with, as it brings in the possibility of fitting in, or not fitting in, with something that is already there. When I'm writing I like to quite quickly bring things together, so that I'm then in the process of curating and arranging materials, rather than starting with a completely blank sheet. I tend to start writing by gathering companions for the journey. Sometimes it's things that I've already written, or quotes by others that I find important. There's a process of writing that Donna

Haraway has described as 'feminist figuration, a kind of storytelling, of situating of self that I find helpful. I came to it through Rosi Braidotti's work on the nomadic subject, but actually Braidotti picks it up from Haraway and they take it in very different directions. Yet for both there is the importance of the micro narrative and storytelling for feminist theory.

The last part of *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis* deals with different theories of figuration. Figuration

is for me a kind of arrangement, but not just material arrangement, also psychic arrangement at the same time; a figuring, responding and then refiguring (see Fig.4). At the time of writing I described *Site-Writing* as a series of 'configurations' but strangely didn't theorize this as a writing practice in the book. To arrange the book as a set of configurations seemed quite an intuitive way of putting the book together, and it was only then in my next book, *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis*, that I started

thinking about how to conceptualize site-writing as a practice of configuring and what that might mean. Figuration or configuration is quite an embodied practice because of its dealing in material fragments and the awareness of what it means to select and arrange them over time. The changing materiality of lived experience is a very important part of contemporary materialist feminist theory, and I would say this process of arranging the world and the self in response, happens through the practice of writing.

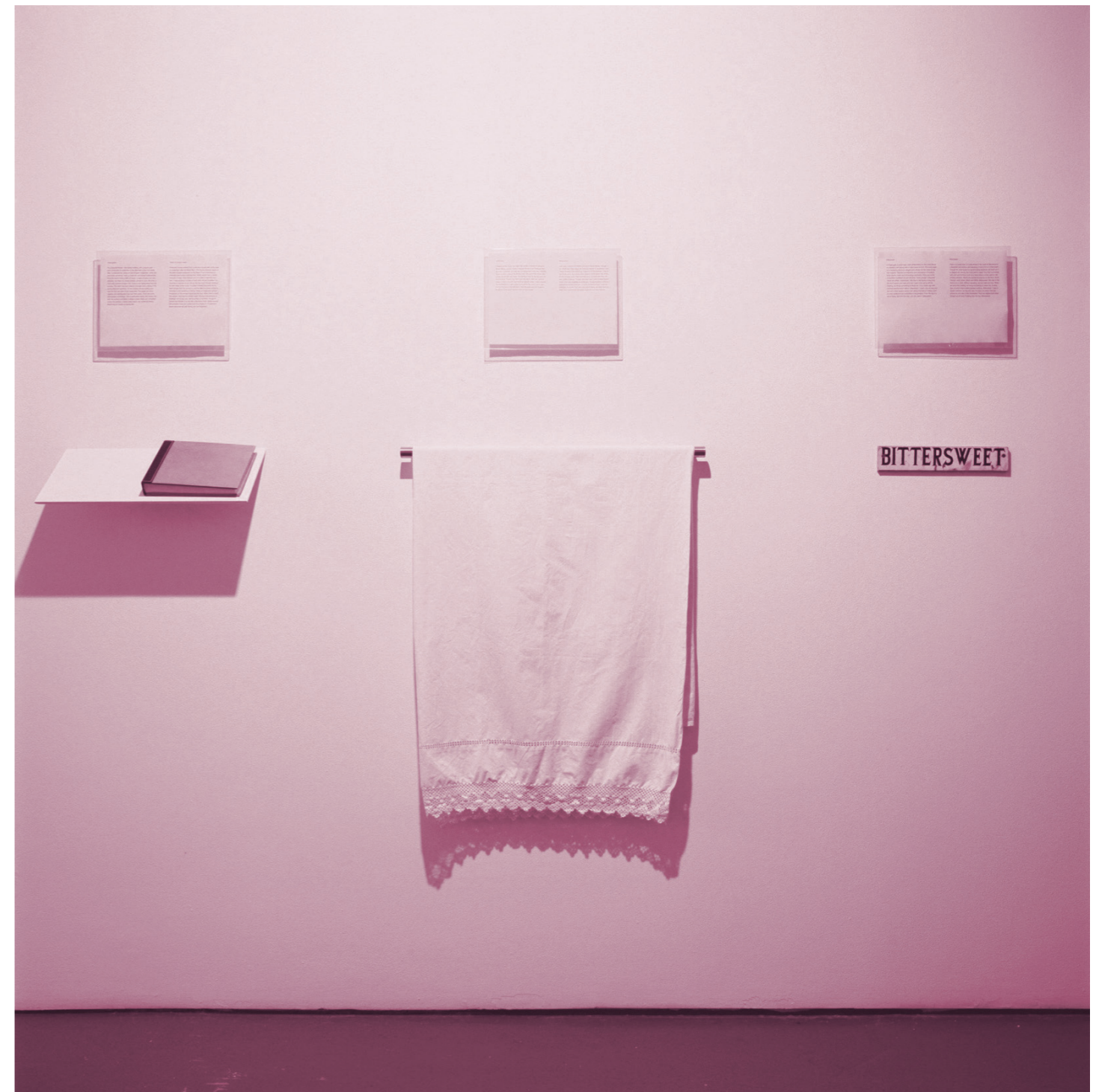


Fig.4 - Jane Rendell, *Les Mots and Les Choses* (2003) *Material Intelligence*, Entwistle Gallery, London (2003). Photograph: the Entwistle Gallery..

SS: *How would you see the relationship to the concerns embodiment and situated concerns of phenomenology?*

JR: I'd like to connect this question about embodiment back to your question on reading as I see the two as interconnected. Site-writing could be thought of as a way of reading site. Quite often that reading of site happens through a mapping, one that is not necessarily disengaged but through an embodied mapping that takes place by walking through sites. Walking is, I think, such a brilliant way of engaging with site because it allows one to be present in the here and now, but also through movement, and sometimes through walking with others, to draw on different associations, to allow different things to come to mind. Walking allows a mixture of past, present and future to emerge, made up of what's very much in front of you, and things that pop up unexpectedly in response to what you see, hear or smell, like memories or dreams. I think that reading site through an embodied process like walking is what makes it possible to understand what might come to matter.

I do think reading can be a practice that cares about sites and subjects. During Covid-19 I set up a website called *Site-Reading Writing Quarterly*. I had become quite tired of the culture of academic peer review. I noticed more than usual how when people didn't have to reveal themselves, they could become quite mean, knowing they would not be called to account or to explain themselves. I started to think how this process was a very unproductive way of responding to another's work. It was also a time, immediately after my Dad died, that I wasn't able to write, that I just wanted to read, and I could only read fiction. I would just choose an author that I loved and read everything they'd ever written. I've always loved reading, especially fiction as a child, then for a long period during the 1990s when I first became an academic, I found myself only reading theory. So I thought let's do something where people can really read each other's

work, and properly engaging with the process of what it means to read each other. *Site-Reading Writing Quarterly* pairs people up who have just published a book, and invites them to read and respond to each other's work. So there's something in it for both people, both writers expose a vulnerability by sharing a book that another will read and respond to. And as both writers will become each other's reader – they know from the initial invitation, that they are going to swap reviews later, it gives the process of re-viewing a relational ethic and responsibility. I also asked contributors to write their biographies from the position of a reader as well as a writer. So the review became about not just what the writer had written but what the writer had read or what kind of reader each writer was. For me, there is a responsibility, as well as an inspiring opportunity, to read other people's work and to keep abreast of what's being produced creatively in our field and in others.

I think there's also another aspect to reading which is important, and that is the idea, or the reality if you like, of reading aloud, and the difference between reading to oneself and reading out loud to others. There are lots of amazing artists who've worked with reading practices, like Sharon Kivland, or Laura Gonzalez, a brilliant performance artist, and many others too, who've explored the vocality of reading as a practice. We have brought different ways of reading into the site-writing class. Polly and I are both interested in how we train our students to read aloud and what happens to breath and posture when reading. There are so many things to think about when one reads aloud to others, and I think some of that gets taken for granted when we're writing, and when we are reading others, because as practices both can become quite disembodied. Reading aloud brings the body back to things and to matter, because if you can't breathe you can't read. There's something about the importance of taking a breath, taking a breather, which might also be a call to slow down. At different times in the site-writing class, we really question

what it means to read a text aloud together, this is something David Roberts has worked on through his manifesto-writing workshops. We also wonder if should we all read the text aloud together, or take it in turns. Should we take the text to different sites and it read aloud? This is something we've done before and has produced some fascinating results and insights. So I find the site-reading-writing relation very productive with lots to explore.

Phenomenology is an area of philosophy that I did not find of interest when I first encountered it, which is surprising because phenomenology concerns lived experience, something which fascinates me. Today with the development of feminist phenomenology and through reading writers like Sara Ahmed and Rosalyn Diprose, and many others, I feel much more drawn to it, and find a strong relationship with site-writing practices. When I was doing my Masters in Architectural History in the early 1990s I positioned myself as a Marxist feminist and was much more interested in historical materialism. At that time I found Merleau-Ponty's writing and other works of phenomenology quite alienating as they seemed to bracket the world off in a way that I found de-politicizing, so I turned away from it. It's only more recently, because of postmodern feminism and the work of feminist and queer phenomenologists, that I've come back to phenomenology and found it really productive for my own writing. Someone like Sara Ahmed is able to bring a political historical material consciousness to thinking through, and responding to, lived and felt experience that is really helpful for developing approaches to site-writing.

CE: *Alberto Pérez-Gómez spoke with us about his concern for the importance of poetic language to the design process. He also discussed this in terms of the gesture and embodiment. Are these concerns that you would feel an affinity with?*

JR: Again that's a really interesting question. I was drawn to Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* as a student.

And I still find it an amazing book, especially his idea that different spatial and architectural features, like the attic and the cellar, can produce a poetics. I really want to do a long essay or book based on *The Poetics of Space*. I would love to consider the poetic elements of archetypal architectures – tables, doors, windows – from the perspective of feminist autotheory, as my interest in poetics comes from the idea of poethics and the concept of ethopoiesis as an ethical process of self-making.

When I first encountered some of the key literature around poetics in architecture it was as a student, and I found them quite depoliticised, Nor was I drawn to the literatures around poetics and technology because I'm not a very technical person. I am, however, really interested in materials, and so it was Foucault's work on self-making, on the subject as a material, and his approach to the practice of ethics which drew me into poetics through the idea of ethopoiesis. In particular I became fascinated by Foucault's ideas of ethics as a practice, a form of relating to self and to world, and the process of making and re-making of self in relation to others through writing, whether it's kind of chronicling through diaries as texts written to the self, or writings that are intended for another, or to be public. There has also been a wonderful strand of writing on ethics coming out of poetry, such as Joan Retallack's idea of a poethics, a poetics that is also an ethics. Then more recently someone like Denise Ferreira da Silva has developed what she calls a 'black feminist poethics.' So for me there is a really interesting way in which poetics and ethics are coming together around the processes of how one remakes oneself in relation to others in the world – as a set of real lived and historical experiences that are gendered, classed and raced.

CE: *How would you say your practice, with its exploration of post-dualist modes of thinking, has impacted on your approach to design and designing? Do you see consequences for design and a designerly way of knowing?*

JR: I like this idea of post-dualist modes of thinking and designing, as a way of bringing the two together. As someone based in an architecture school in a time of ecocide and genocide, the impact of ways of thinking on making, and the reverse is actually vital. In *Art and Architecture* I was concerned with the theory practice relationship, and keen to challenge the idea that theory comes first and practice afterwards, that practice is an example of theory. I don't think I ever really believed this was the case, for me practice is what generates theory. I do think it has been quite hard to see in architectural academia how the relation could be reversed, because for decades the publishing world has set up a dichotomy, which draws a strong distinction between books on architectural theory on the one hand, and monograph glosses on buildings that have already been produced on the other. There is still a strong tradition of separating theory and practice, both in architectural education and in publishing, but I think that practice-led research has created a space between, a place of liminality, that allows for entanglements and crossovers that reveal not only how practice generates theory but also how theory is a form of practice.

As someone who worked a great deal with feminist deconstruction, I've been interested in critiquing binaries, particularly because binaries don't allow for fertile crossovers, they tend to denigrate one side and prioritize the other. So trying to think of ways of working that don't fit binary models I find really intriguing, but also an ethical requirement. I think that's why practice led research is so important, because it challenges different types of knowledge production and says they're not separated, they are together. You don't have research over here and practice over there, it's actually a process that is inter-related. I suppose I think of site-writing as a process of that sort. Although site-writing might be categorised as a so-called seminar module, it is actually taught through workshops more like one might teach studio. For me,

that's really important because it means that people come to write through doing, that they learn to trust the process of intuition, of trying stuff out, experimenting and not being quite sure what's going on. Trusting not-yet-knowing. That's why we use workshop techniques, such as very short writing exercises, and participatory methods, like working in pairs, and trying out forms of call and response which can be so helpful.

There's an amazing book, *Devising Theatre and Performance* by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris, who are performance practitioners. The book is full of site-specific theatre exercises. I've used some of them with students this year for the first time and they're just so brilliant because in doing a short exercise you can try stuff out and end up somewhere that you didn't expect to go. Finding ways to improvise in teaching and in writing is important. Part of this method involves sharing work with others through a process a bit like the surrealist game of the Exquisite Corpse, where you don't quite know what will happen next, you put something out there, and see what might come back, and you find yourself constantly surprised in the process. This means allowing yourself to be changed by someone else or by a situation. I think it's this kind of psychic condition of being open to change that we need to be in to respond to the climate crisis. To be able to change, we can't cling on to old capitalist and racist extractivist habits. These habits are killing us and our planet, and architecture as a profession has to be willing to really change itself. What I hope from my site-writing practice and pedagogical experiments, is that writing practice is understood, not as a kind of separate strand of thinking that is not relevant or doesn't inform the design studio, but rather as a way of allowing us to "trust in what is difficult", to quote the poet Rilke, and to transform. Hopefully this can build a different type of subjectivity, being open to others, to experiment with different ways of responding to what the world needs now in this time of intersecting crises.