

writing in place of speaking

[these excerpts are taken from Jane Rendell, 'Writing in place of speaking', Sharon Kivland and Lesley Sanderson (eds.), *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*, (Sheffield Hallam University and the Site Gallery, 2003).]

Last November: Sharon Kivland asked me to write a piece for a book she was editing called *Transmission: Speaking and Listening*. The book was to include the transcripts of discussions following artists' talks held in Sheffield on the theme of homelessness, spatiality and anxiety. As I recall, Sharon asked me not to write about the artists or their works – not to produce art criticism – but to create a piece of writing that would sit alongside the artists' texts. The deadline was June.

Early June: time was running out. I sent Sharon several texts I had already written with other projects in mind, but which I felt fitted her brief. Some were finished pieces of writing, others were in draft form; some had already been published, others were yet without a home. Sharon responded, 'Sorry, Jane – I commissioned a new piece of work specifically for this project'.

Late June: time has run out. And I have written nothing. But what is troubling me? It's not a question of time nor is it Sharon's insistence that I write something new. I admire her tenacity; it forces me to write some new work. But it is precisely around the definition of 'new work' that I am uncomfortable. How do we draw a line between 'new' and 'old' work? If within the context of 'new' work, it is considered reasonable to quote someone else's old work, then why not quote your own 'old' work? After all, a piece of writing is never entirely new; I always draw on and transform previous ideas.

In the context of this particular book the question of what constitutes 'work' is also perplexing me. As I understand it, a number of artists were invited to speak about 'work' that had already been made. These presentations were followed by discussions, which were then transcribed into written words. A number of writers were asked to write new words. It appears that the use of words by 'artists' and 'writers' has been positioned differently in relation to definitions of work and newness. For artists, talking about the work is taken to be part of the discourse; for writers this is not so. For artists, old work is part of new work, part of an on-going process of creative development; for writers, texts tend to be considered as separate endeavours, where an old text ends a new one begins. Although my observations pertain to this specific book, I believe that despite, or maybe because of, the inter-disciplinary context in which most practitioners now operate, there is an underlying desire to maintain distinctions between such practices as art and writing.

I come to writing as an architect, and it is perhaps for this reason, that I have decided to make my writing a critique of the brief. The text that follows is a written reflection on a number of works – previously made – made of words – that address questions of homelessness, spatiality and anxiety. In place of speaking, I offer you writing.

Biomorphology: the shape a life takes

When Jonathan Hill asked me to contribute a chapter about DIY for a book he was editing called *Occupying Architecture* at first I declined. Then, at the suggestion of a colleague, Iain Borden, I decided to write about a place in which I had previously lived. My co-habitant of that house, Iain Hill, had been making our living space through an unusual mode of DIY, much of which involved the removal, rather than the addition, of building elements, as well as the use of objects for purposes they had never been designed for.

On a leafy street in Clapham, minutes from the common, is a terraced house which was my home for two years. Scattered all over London, all over England, all over the world, are other homes, houses where I once lived. In some still standing, I return and revisit past lives and loves. Others have been destroyed, physically crushed in military coups, or erased from conscious memory only to be revisited in dreams.

[...]

Through its fragile structure this house physically embraced my need for transiency, and it was perhaps this unhomeliness, which made it feel more like home to me than any other.¹

This was the first piece of writing where I juxtaposed my own voice with those of various critical theorists, and where I referred to my life as the subject matter for theoretical reflection. This incorporation of the personal into the critical had different kinds of effect depending on the reader. Other academics and artist friends loved the piece – they liked it because I was so ‘present’ in the work. But my retelling of events had disturbed two important people in my personal life. My mum was upset by my description of this house, as ‘more like home to me than any other’. Iain Hill’s response was more antagonistic. My description rendered the house unrecognisable to him.

This writing is the first of what I have now come to call ‘confessional constructions’. The responses I received made me aware that words do not mean the same thing for writer and

¹ Jane Rendell, ‘Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse’, Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

reader. The text also raised many questions about story telling. While the subject matter and subjective stance of a personal story may upset the objective tone of academic writing, writing for a theoretical context repositions and interprets events in ways that may be uncomfortable for those involved in the story. Writing about the transitory nature of a house in which I once lived, and the questionable DIY of my housemate in order to question the authorial position of the architect and the permanence of architecture assumed by the profession is not simply the recounting of a series of events in my life. But it may appear to be so because the critical take is in the form rather than the content, the adoption of the narrative style itself, an implicit rather than an explicit critical act.

Since I define myself through my relationships, to write about myself involves writing about others. But what do these others make of the subjects they become in my writing? Like the fiction writer who uses friends and family as the basis for characters, I also use others in my writing. But unlike the fiction writer, who provides a disguise through a character, my writing offers nowhere to hide. But perhaps, as Roland Barthes once argued in his seminal essay, 'The Death of the Author', there is one place to shelter. If the 'reading' of the story is a place where meaning is constructed then there is not simply one 'truth' concerning the events and characters referred to.² And to take this further, into the contemporary theoretical context, the very act of 'telling' the story may also be understood as a site where meaning is constructed.

We all like to talk about ourselves and in the right setting we tell stories about our past. When I decided to write about a Welsh dresser inherited by my mother, I found myself remembering events from my childhood. What fascinated me was the way in which certain details altered each time I remembered them, while others somehow became fixed. Mieke Bal has pointed out that the story a person remembers is not identical to the one that happened, but that it is the 'discrepancy' itself that becomes the dramatic act.

'Memory' is an act of 'vision' of the past, but as an act it is situated in the memory's present. It is often a narrative act: loose elements come together and cohere into a story so that they can be remembered and eventually told.³

And for bell hooks, it is the lack of distinction between 'fact and interpretation of fact' in our remembering of the past that has influenced her own thinking about autobiography:

²Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text*, (London: Flamingo, 1977), pp. 142-8.

³ Mieke Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, (Amsterdam; G and B Arts International, 2001), pp. 47-8.

Experimental memoirs have become the cultural sites for more imaginative accountings of an individual's life. [...] Audre Lourde – introduced to readers the concept of biomythography to encourage a move away from the notion of autobiography as an exact accounting of life. Encouraging readers to see dreams and fantasies as part of the material we use to invent the self.⁴

Having read this piece, I misremembered Lourde's term 'biomythography' as 'biomorphology', or in my mind 'the shape a life takes', reflecting my interest in autobiography as a kind of spatial writing or even travelogue. Travel stories and autobiographies describe where we have come from, where we are going and what it is like along the way.

[...]

While writing this piece I started to read the work of Homi Bhabha and was drawn to his notion of performative time. Bhabha argues that the subject is only graspable in the time between telling and being told. This emphasises the temporal element to 'telling'; but there is also a spatial aspect, the time between telling and being told is also the place between here and somewhere else. This is a double scene, Bhabha says, a scene which demonstrates that the very condition of cultural knowledge is the alienation of the subject.⁵ Importance shifts from the one who is telling, or 'articulating', to where this articulation is taking place, the 'topos of enunciation'.⁶ That the listener will tell again, somewhere else, helps to dissipate the omnipotence of the writer or speaker. The power to create meaning is reallocated, not only to the 'Barthesian' reader or the listener, but to the teller, emphasising both that there are multiple points of telling *and* that a listener can also be a teller.

As narrator she is narrated as well. And in a way she is already told, and what she herself is telling will not undo that somewhere else is she is told.⁷

The notion of the 'topos of enunciation' provided the inspiration to translate 'White Linen' into Korean for an audio work for an exhibition in Seoul that explored the relationship between architecture, memory and colour. When I heard my text spoken in Korean I could no longer

⁴ bell hooks, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, (London: The Women's Press, 1998), p. xix.

⁵ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 150.

⁶ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 162.

⁷ Interestingly this quote comes not from Bhabha himself, but from Bhabha quoting Lyotard and Thebaud, in J K Lyotard and J L Theobald, *Just Gaming*, W Godzich trans., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 41. See Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 150 and footnote 31 p. 267.

understand it. Further, the change in tone and gender of the voice (I had asked for the text to be spoken by an older man) made me feel quite estranged from my own writing. I am hoping to ask a woman, an American citizen of Korean descent, to translate this Korean voice into 'English' for another audio piece to be exhibited in Los Angeles later this year. The second stage of the translation will both return and remove the work from the original text. For although the words will be returned to me, in the sense that I will once again understand them, they will not be those that I once wrote.

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