

AMIDST . . . : AFTERIMAGE, AFFECT, ARCHITECTURE

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AMIDST: AFTERIMAGE

Referring to a sketch in his notebook, the anthropologist Michael Taussig points to the magnetism of an event he recorded in a spur-of-the-moment sketch after witnessing an occurrence on the highway.¹ Taussig saw a group of people lying down at the entrance to a freeway tunnel in Medellín in Colombia, just after midday. A woman in this group was seen sewing herself and a man into a white nylon bag, the type used to hold potatoes, at the edge of a stream of passing cars. As his own taxi sped past, the assemblage of freeway tunnel entrance with two persons being sewn into a bag persisted in Taussig's imagination.

Taussig's sketch, titled *I Swear I Saw This*, is the vivid afterimage. It haunts the anthropologist. He regards his unschooled, at-the-spur-of-the-moment sketch a 'talisman' – a piece of magical evidence that holds the unravelling to his instinctual but vital witnessing.² Yet, this piece of evidence presents its own problems. Born out of curiosity, it forces *both* speculation and close reading. Placed within a prevailing research paradigm that distances knowledge/

logic from creativity/intuition, the emerging questions surrounding two figures disappearing into a nylon bag in a traffic slipstream are easily curtailed because of their happenstance. Coincidental encounters are often unwelcomed in intensely cross-referenced and carefully curated academic narratives. Engaging the resistance to compulsive subjects compelling a researcher affectively, Taussig's text patiently stitches what is out of place to reveal the seams of knowledge in academe. He points to where his persistent afterimage rubs against the limits of his (and our) discipline(s), and how academic training may limit how we think, tell, and write. What might be gained, and/or lost in knowledge production, when subjects of study are encountered through perspectives remote to one's disciplinary boundaries? What kinds of knowledge might be generated when remote points of view are left uncolonised by disciplinary norms? Taussig's sketch enacts a 'thinking-feeling',³ a response that reaches for analytical depth while at the same time preserving its capacity for intuition, in keeping with what is encountered. 'Affect is a way to account for experience in its in-forming.'⁴ The sketch – an affective artefact – demands

a commensurate yet-to-come narrative as its corollary and opens up a potential field of inquiry requiring analytical and projective perspicacity.

The making and aftermath of Taussig's sketch accounts for the material and speculative configurations which bind the researcher to scene and situation, where the 'in-each-otherness'⁵ of the couple in a bag taking place in a freeway tunnel makes it impossible to think of the tunnel without bag or couple. For the anthropologist, the serendipitous discovery of this impressionable scene, inhabited only in passing as opposed to long-term observation, invalidates the former's status as evidence. Yet, Taussig is piqued. The afterimage presents to him a 'third meaning, which makes you grope for meaning when you least expect it in a taxi rushing into a tunnel'.⁶ Here, he borrows Roland Barthes's theorisation of the film image, where apart from what is given as information and what is symbolic, there is, in the visual moments which arrest our imagination, a 'third meaning' that is 'evident, erratic and obstinate'.⁷

But the third meaning, Taussig argues, is not a meaning at all. It is really a hole or a gap, that arises from the struggle with interpretation.⁸ The third meaning, occurs where discursive interpretation falters; signification is thwarted. The third meaning which is obtuse in character, emerges from this fault.⁹ It is exuberant, resides on the side of the carnivalesque, and operates 'outside culture, knowledge, information'.¹⁰ The third/obtuse meaning 'is a signifier without a signified', that is to say, it exceeds descriptive capacity although it is mutually sensed – thus, it remains 'outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution'.¹¹ The sketch with its third/obtuse meaning persistently envelopes, exerts, infuses, engulfs – or as John Berger describes the making of life drawings, 'you are, as it were, inside it'.¹² Thus although this third meaning hit him 'first and foremost', Barthes cannot make up for it in explanation,

description, or identification: 'I cannot name that which pricks me.'¹³ The scene that becomes an afterimage, that becomes a sketch, that becomes a talisman, is affective. 'Affect', the philosopher Brian Massumi emphasises, opens a 'point of entry into an eventful, relational field of complexity that is already active, and still open-ended'.¹⁴ Taussig's sketch leads to the recognition of an unlikely network – the people in the nylon bag, the paramilitaries, the freeway, and the forest which came before it; these compel as evidence, and must be made sense of, despite not immediately fitting into an anthropological narrative.

When we encounter architecture indirectly and circuitously through evidence lying outside architecture's disciplinary frame, how do we account for such remote, non-disciplinary-abiding modes of knowing? Taussig's insistence on recording and preserving the immediate and the emergent may be transposed towards re-evaluating this situation. This affective encounter, like Taussig's talisman, punctures the presumptions of the 'proper and automatic relationship between thinking subject, concept, and world',¹⁵ since the researcher cannot always control what compels her attention, or what eventually becomes her subject of study. Following Taussig's example, architecture may also be encountered in a mode of distraction, or through a detour. I contend that the formation of the architectural subject should account for this detour – folding the getting-to-know segment into the discourse. The affective encounter, fraught with issues of proximity and distance, is a critical, politicised, and perceptive route towards constructing architectural knowledge. Consequently, architectural discourse led through affect is repositioned amidst unfamiliar subjects and objects, whose structure, form, aesthetics, and material presence are mutually formative in the production of architectural knowledge.

AMIDST: AFFECT

focused on the relational, affect is concerned with what happens between. To think through affect requires thinking relationally through an event or a situation. The event exerts its pull; one is 'absorbed in the encounter' and senses the impending.¹⁶ Calling this transindividual stage 'enactive understanding' or 'thinking-feeling', Massumi advances that affect can be strategically used to hold together that which is divided and unthinkable. Hence, the understanding of affect enables one to recompose forms of relations such that previously mutually exclusive subjects/objects may occupy the 'same field'.¹⁷ This inclusion is not for the sake of recuperating what is left out, but to affirm a space for non-status quo configurations, agencies, and issues as contributing particular surplus-value to life.¹⁸ Affect is thus political in its pragmatics of mobilising a 'heightening of capacities' and a 'felt excess of potential', the surplus being particularly relevant where capacities to act, think, and feel are diminished by a status quo structure.

Where might affect be located, and what is its role in architecture? In her disambiguation of affect, the architectural philosopher and theorist Hélène Frichot argues that architecture's instrumentalisation of affect as phenomenological diminishes its political stance, rendering affect an aesthetic outcome, vacuously conjured through design. Instead of considering the *objet d'architecture*, Frichot reiterates the relational and affective power of infrastructure, giving the example of the street and its capacity to galvanise bodies into action, to provide space to act, protest, march.¹⁹ The street is thus more than a circulation space; it is symbolic. Through an affective lens, the street offers a materialist reading – as a concrete space with geometries, dimensions, and objects, but equally brimming with potential. This materialist concern works well for architecture which is similarly invested in

what Gilles Deleuze calls the 'real-but-abstract', that is, the simultaneous conception of something materially and physically present but with an equal potential to change, or to exist as an idea/ideal. The conception of architecture as a continuum for multiple potentialities parallels Massumi's argument of affect as 'autonomous'; that is, while affect is implicated in historically situated conditions and operates within prevalent modes of power, affective encounters and events leave behind a remainder or a surplus, which circulates, connects, relates, and carries the potential to reconfigure into new relations of significance.²⁰ The street holds this potentiality-inducing surplus; it ignites possibilities for action.

Here, I shift the location and role of affect into the realm of architectural discourse. Returning to Taussig's encounter, affect circulates in the problematics of the emergent subject's form and representation, jointly straining the gatekeeping tendencies of his (and our) discipline(s). The complex assemblage of two people in a nylon bag (a micro-event/form/arrangement) at the side of the freeway tunnel (a macro-assemblage) screams at the anthropologist because of where the micro-assemblage is lodged – the nylon bag is at the boundary *between* micro- and macro-assemblages. Thus, its affect is explosive, akin to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe of affects being 'counterattack[s]' and acting like 'projectiles' or 'weapons'.²¹

Yet the wide-ranging and increasingly vague conceptualisation of affect presents challenges. In her critique of the 'turn to affect', the literary and media theorist Eugenie Brinkema opines that the episteme of affect, although pluralistic in its motivations and conducted across distinctive fields of study, eventuates in shared and repeated terms of reference such as intensity, force, agitation, sensation, excess, embodiment, and so on.²² Even while affect accounts for the speculative and the anticipated, for it to matter in discourse, affect needs to be theorised within disciplinary

structures of knowledge, rather than being 'excluded from the rational'.²³

Transposing Taussig's encounter, with 'architecture' as a macro-assemblage, how can architectural discourse account for the oblique encounters (the insertion of micro-assemblages) pivotal to the formation of the architectural subject? In other words, what is an architectural discourse which considers the detour of the micro-assemblage as integral to the production of the architectural subject? What then counts as evidence? Returning to the potentialities of the street and the highway scene, we might posit architecture as a site surging with affective remainders. Can affect illuminate close readings of 'encounters-with' architecture via these disciplinary-bending detours? 'Encounters-with' – developed from Massumi's 'writing-with'²⁴ – emphasises an encounter perceived from a newly relational perspective. The preposition 'with' signals emergent regions of contact and overlap, and one being affected by that which/whom one encounters. The tracing of the affective encounter anchors architecture's formation as relationally positioned *between* things, people, and objects. A discourse tracing the contours of such encounters will shift architecture into a background-effect, and potentially alter its constituent forms of knowledge.

Affect emphasises modes of figuring out, thinking around, writing- and making-with that deal with the potentials of 'what-ifs' and 'as-ifs'. The tracing of such potentials and their momentary capture have been conceptualised through Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's 'thought in the act',²⁵ Isabelle Stengers's 'vivid pragmatics',²⁶ and Donna Haraway's 'composite'²⁷ of emerging worlds.²⁸ These notions of affect are conscious of 'duration, iteration and modes of . . . taking place'.²⁹ In *Architectures of the Unforeseen*, Massumi describes the struggle of 'writings-with' (rather than writings about) architects and artists. He documents the happenstance encounters,

where philosophy avoids wresting control of its unsanctioned subjects to allow 'aparaallel evolutions', enacted as events for staging dialogues and contingent processes or encounters to occur in the spaces between these disciplines, their techniques, and core knowledges.³⁰ Massumi emphasises an urgency to capture the immediacy of such encounters precisely because it is at such junctures where something new will happen. He calls this fertile space 'a region of problematic overlap'.³¹

I am making a case for affect as a problematic of architecture's representational forms, in particular, architectural discourse. This is also to say that affect can reside in here if the components of architectural discourse – its narrative arc, modes of evidence, agency, and voice, amongst others – are open to reconfiguration. Affect takes place when a clearing is made for it in discourse. Found in encounters with objects and subjects which circuitously draw one into architecture, affect is further sustained in discourse when such circuits are woven into the warp and weft of architecture's existing narratives. Thus, the possible modes of encounter-with architecture require both closer and expanded reading. By tracing the affective encounter, architecture might be galvanised as a fertile ground of affective remainders. Consequently, an affective architectural discourse is not concerned only with what architecture is, but what it can become, how it can act, and how it might relate to the changing world that surrounds it. These encounters-with are not props, ruses, or embellishments. They are projectiles which prompt a mutual taking-account in narration, forms, and theories of architecture.³² They have specific geometry, structure, and aesthetics; they produce durations within and relations with the architectures they lead us towards. The encounters-with have a generative productivity in changing architecture's discursive representation of knowledge.

AMIDST: ARCHITECTURE

Refracting this proposition through the writing practice of architectural critic, theorist, and historian Jane Rendell, the final section examines how multifariously indirect and oblique encounters-with architecture may be re-evaluated and narrated. Rendell has worked through writing experiments where architecture's existence and emergence is mapped against perspectives and references outside the discipline. I consider Rendell's text work, which she theorises as a 'site-writing' – a writing contingent upon a site's constraints and potentials – an architectural construction in and of itself. Rendell's own career trajectory exemplifies oftentimes positions of the in-between. She has a background in architectural design, researches architectural history, teaches public art, and is committed to working at the intersections of a myriad of domains, from feminist theory to conceptual art practice.

The Welsh dresser was constructed in the 1830s and has been in the family for at least five generations. In my childhood, it occupied one wall of the dining room in my great aunt's house in Cwmgor, a small mining village near the Black Mountain (Y Myndd Du) in South Wales. The dining room was one of two rooms that faced the street; both were immaculate, seldom used and always cold. The Welsh dresser stood opposite the window, obscured by a layer of net and a pair of heavy velvet curtains, always drawn back, slightly faded at the points where the fabric met the light. Hung with gorgeous antique jugs that could never be touched, and that rattled every time a coal lorry passed by on the road outside, the Welsh dresser was a difficult thing.³³

In an earlier essay, 'An Atlas of the Welsh Dresser' (2003), Rendell raises questions of the family house, family belongings, and the dilemma of belonging.³⁴ Kept by her family for five generations,

the heirloom is a sturdy piece of furniture that contains an array of everyday household and some sentimental items, neatly arranged in small pots and tins tucked within its shelves and drawers. Rendell's 'site-specific writing'³⁵ focuses on the production of a performative architectural/spatial text, which unfolds in relation to the writer/researcher's identification with material and psychological conditions of an encountered site. 'Each of the stories I tell', Rendell explains, 'are only possible because of the spaces they take place in. Certain forms of architecture offer possibilities of certain kinds of encounter to occur. Writing about what has occurred is not only the tracing of the story, but the creation of a new place in its own right.'³⁶ The dresser becomes an interpersonal and affective object through which disciplinary and affective positions intertwine – architectural and biographical details; factual and experiential encounters; history and memory. Rendell's site-writing through the inherited Welsh dresser seeks to 'undo'³⁷ the architectural perception of the family house, and at the same time to reconstruct it through an inventory of material evidence, fragments of memory, and extended reflections. The essay reveals the critical, if problematic, positioning of the writer in the epistemological process of constructing a distant and objectified discourse. Site-writing is also not historiographically constrained.³⁸ Its spatio-temporal sequence depends on how the writer is situated in relation to the architecture or space in her encounter.

Alongside photographic evidence of the dresser's contents, Rendell purposefully constructs three types of writings: dictionary definitions of the objects, childhood memories evoked by the household items, and discursive passages that only make sense when read in relation to the other two genres of text. The dictionary definitions, far from being objective, reclaim lost meanings, and reveal speculative connections that 'point away from her (personal) memories'.³⁹ The discursive

passages are reflexive in their construction – they look inwards as well as outwards, simultaneously going backward in time and projecting forwards. In these constructions, the architectural critic is at the threshold – previously an occupant, now an outsider. The material objects also work metonymically. In a daisy-chain configuration, they link an object to a memory, referencing in turn other sites, occupants, and experiences elsewhere.

The dresser was placed in a cold and immaculate, but rarely used, dining room. Located at the front of the house, it was what the passer-by saw when peering through the lace-curtained windows that opened onto the street. Its weight, utility, and sturdiness were undermined by the fragility of the antique jugs which rattled with the passing traffic. A juxtaposition of two worlds in one object, the Welsh dresser holds the rugged landscape of a coal mining town against a working-class family's aspirations for the future. The dresser is an architectural detail which places the house in conversation with unspoken matters of class, gender, sexuality, the melancholy of loss, and the passing of time.

Developing the psychological dimension of architecture, Rendell's recent monograph *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis* (2017) is an ambitious work that moves across structures of architectural knowledge related to the unconscious. In this project, she overlays the methods of constructing an architectural history of four modernist housing projects⁴⁰ against the conceptual frame of psychoanalysis. The work inquires why we are drawn to certain subjects, and how our fascination is not merely personal but what the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls an 'attunement' which binds thought and world, self and subject.⁴¹

Rendell's writing in this latest volume negotiates three concurrent registers – findings from her own house-hunting episodes in London in the early 2000s. The domestic/subclinical settings and epistemologies of psychoanalysis which hold her interest, and the architectural

histories of the four iconic social housing projects, form the structure of the book. Yet, when I read it, I instinctively followed the differentiated texture, type, and weight of the pages (matt, sepia-tint for psychoanalysis; glossy, white for architectural history; semi-matte, off-white for Rendell's personal journeys), and navigated myself through families of images that punctuated these pages (single images with minimal interference of texts symmetrically placed for architectural history and psychoanalytical theory – on the left for psychoanalysis; on the right for architectural history; and the breaking of these rules when they detail Rendell's personal journeys – text and image follow each other closely, talking across, and to, the other). The epistemological and material distinctions between psychoanalysis and architecture – so carefully designed to be separated, but inevitably seen in transition and amidst each other – start to blur.

The writing deftly performs the psychoanalytic switchovers where the analyst, who knows by interpreting the heard and seen, changes positions with the analysand, who accrues meanings and identity(ies) through her instinctual construction of forgotten histories. In Rendell's 'encounters with the unconscious of architecture', she examines how the architectural critic or historian might also be shifting positions between the analyst who is ostensibly in control, and the analysand who is finding her way around fragments of knowledge gathered over time.⁴² Rendell acknowledges her intention to engage her reader in this to-and-fro motion of knowing, where the a-parallel accompaniment of image and text produces knots of questions, refracting knowledge as meaningful only when these are situated and relational, though still fluid, through 'a sequence of transitional spaces between objects and subjects'.⁴³

In Rendell's site-writings, site is configured and conceptualised as situational. Site-as-situation is further delineated through three relational and enlarging aspects of the text: the

text as sites for writing, reading, and re-writing (or writing over); *disciplinary boundaries* as sites for reflexive dialogue; and *transitional objects* (many of these non-architectural) as sites for examining material encounters. Significantly too, Rendell has a habit of re-working her own texts. Over time, texts like 'An Atlas of the Welsh Dresser' are revisited; new sections are written to sit alongside previous ones. This writing practice treats the text as a tenuous edifice, with parts that need to be mended, altered, and reconfigured. The evolving text shifts its original contexts, thus continuing to make new relationships with other texts, other disciplines, and other objects. The text is treated as a construction with a form, although Brinkema reminds us that form 'is not determined or determinable in advance, is not paraphrasable or unmemorisable, essential or given, is not immediately perceptible. Rather form must each time be read for.'⁴⁴ I interpret 'form' as referring to one of these: the forms of address or the writing genre adopted by the researcher; the forms of relationship and agency prioritised in the construction of the argument; and last, the selected forms of evidence.

Without evoking theories of affect, Rendell's site-writing demonstrates what it means to read the site closely, taking seriously evidence which may appear at first glance obtuse according to disciplinary norms, and working faithfully through the difficulties of what compels. The outcome is the making of an architectural subject inseparable from the details and intricacies of the world that animates it. Thus, I argue that site-

writing outlines a possible prototypology of affect in architectural discourse. By dwelling amidst the sites/situations of writing and being sentient to interconnected events, Rendell's practice enacts a holding for affective residues, creating space for uncanny, divided, and inexpressible relationships to take form.

Challenging academic norms of keeping a distance from one's subject of study, the practice of site-writing shows how it may be possible to be amidst and between – to compose multiple residual situations proximate and compelling to the researcher whilst being politically connected to collective agendas. An affective architectural discourse is arguably distant from academic practice on many counts – the entry into an architectural question enacted through an encounter-with non-architectural micro-assemblages involving subjects/objects connected to a site/architecture, the pursuit of what may be architecturally oblique theories and narratives that accompany these micro-assemblages, and the coming-to-architecture from a transindividual but still invested relational perspective. Yet, an affective architectural discourse also significantly stays proximate to the creative practice of architecture. It constructs an agile discursive space that leans on the modes of encounter, forms of evidence, and possible narrative arcs which delineate the architectural subject. It strives for the emergent energy, complexity of detail, and political potential which reside in an intuitive sketch such as the one of two persons sewing themselves into a nylon bag.