

IN THE SHADOW OF . . . A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

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On Friday 9 October 2020, at approximately 7.20pm Singapore time, *Remote Practices* closed with a roundtable discussion over the virtual medium. The occasion marked the end of a fully online conference held over two days, featuring presentations and conversations from junior and senior academics, as well as designers. Conversing across five different time zones, key participants of the conference – Paul Emmons, C.J. Lim, Joan Ockman, Jane Rendell, Philip Ursprung, Naomi Stead, Lilian Chee, and Matthew Mindrup – engaged in critical reflections on remote practices. Much can be said in wrapping up a book that begins in intra-architectural anxieties and ends in extra-architectural possibilities, but it is only appropriate to begin in the same way as that which this conclusion attempts to reconfigure – that is, the spirit of reflexivity which defined the mood of the conference's closing roundtable.

There is irony in the textual translation of a verbal conversation occurring almost ten months ago for a conference on remoteness, conducted online across irreconcilable time zones. Inevitably, the passing of time has wedged a distance between one's present vantage point and the immediacy of speech one submitted to then. Fortifying this

remoteness further, the global COVID-19 situation is still holding its own. Much to the dismay of many worldwide, the welcomed vaccine has not fully quelled anxieties of disease and collapse. Since *Remote Practices*, there was a resurgence of the pandemic in the United States and the United Kingdom in the last weeks of 2020. The virus mutated again and ravaged India at the beginning of April 2021. Threats of new variants continue to befuddle multinational efforts to contain its spread and the resultant casualties. We can now confidently say that looking back at *Remote Practices*, we very much were – and still are – amidst events that have not yet unfolded to completion.

DISTANCE

It is thus inevitable that this account be both retrospective and projective, dialoguing with that which has been said, and that which has not. At the time of writing (September 2021), Zoom still dominates the disembodied space of communication and community for much of the global population. Month on month,

opinions circulating in the mass media remind us of the many frustrated, fatigued, and fevered, though sometimes favourable, attitudes of how we relate to others on the online platform, across all institutions including those of family, labour, religion, and kinship. One need only read headlines like 'The Zoom Boom Is Horrible. I Can No Longer Look at My Face for Hours on End'; 'My Years on Wall Street Showed Me Why You Can't Make a Deal on Zoom';² and 'What We Lose When We Livestream Church'³ to see where these grievances are directed. These headlines implicitly speak of the desire for the return of the now increasingly cautious – and thus diminished – fleshy, in-person encounter. The lament about the collapse of physical space has its roots not just in nostalgia for sociality but also the real fatigue of multitasking, the ultra-contraction of the spaces of work and home, and the obligation to be virtually available at all times of the day to all groups, perhaps as a compensation for the diminishing physical contact.

A Zoom room's spaces of conversation cannot be symmetrical. Faces are bound by small rectangles, which are bound further by the rectangle of the screen. Speech overlays on interrupting speech. These interruptions are often followed by an awkward silence and tilting of heads where the group asks if they can be seen and heard, combining in one swoop concerns of etiquette and technology. One's own face, by default, is always the first among the company of supposed equals. Hence a conversation is constituted by a *mélange* of monologues and disruptions, making conversation more an effort that one must *make happen*. This struggle was also experienced in the closing roundtable where the monologues, though riveting, lacked the distinct back-and-forth jousting of the physical roundtable.

However, at the same time, the online conversations enabled many to participate in global-local conferences, thus also opening the

academic space of participation to a more diffused public, rather than being restricted to academic experts. This new spectator profile inevitably influences how online academic content might transform from insular discussions to open-ended public-inflected debates. Further, the spontaneous restructuring of the online format has implications for subject selection and epistemologies, resulting – as it did for *Remote Practices* – in a conference not just for an international audience gathered in a function room of a hotel or a university, but a live-streamed, real-time event to those interested enough to tune in from their own living rooms, bedrooms, studies, or kitchens. Think for a moment here about the coincident and complex overlapping of discursive, physical, social, and temporal spaces in this situation. The conference, this publication, its concluding roundtable, and the present account of that roundtable all in part speculate what the sequel will be, and what attitudes could follow.

As this conclusion is being written, Singapore is emerging from the second of two 'soft' lockdowns, New South Wales is beginning to enter another, and New Zealand is facing a lockdown after almost six months of living normally. More critically then, given these conditions, the writing of this account offers an exciting opportunity to practise, immediately, what this book speculates and specifies of the remote. While this will by no means be exemplary, the writing of this account demonstrates the messiness of doing discourse and criticism without the distance so prized by the former, and the immediacy necessary to the latter. COVID-19 has not yet ended; none have authority to speak on its implications with any distance, while its immediacy means one is caught inbetween as it unfolds. The following parts of this conclusion are written under the shadow of the pandemic, of Zoom, and of an unfolding scholarship galvanised by the enforcement of physical distance and the reciprocity of spirited collegial proximity.

RELATIONALITY

I was trying to make the argument that . . . the task of making the invisible visible is one that has to be taken on within architecture itself and has to be thought [about] consciously today. I think that certain architecture has always done this: we find ourselves on occasion in the presence of a realised, embodied work that causes us to make an imaginative and cognitive leap to something beyond itself, to understand it not just as a singular aesthetic and functional entity but also as part of a system of material things and a web of relations.

Joan Ockman's comment refers to the image that opened her talk and the conference at large – a strange pattern that appeared abstract and scaleless on screen. The pattern was later revealed as a photograph of the marble plinth in Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building. For Ockman, there are architectures that, whether consciously or not, 'embody autobiographically, the larger conditions of production from which they have emerged'. This marble – created naturally by immense pressure and heat in the earth, mined from a quarry, cut by a stonemason, transported by a shipping crew, and installed by a builder – 'remembers' its origins and s/he who laboured to bring it from then, to now. In this framing, architecture is no longer a singularity but an instant in a vast and sprawling network of events and actions. Further, as global and local labour networks are formed, the hierarchies between these need to be considered. Reversing assumptions that 'the local (architect's) associate merely follows, implementing the instructions from the design architect and translating them into the local building dialect', Paul Emmons argues that the forces of the local can perhaps trickle up to influence the international architect, thus further challenging the imbalance of power and material implications.

Ockman's argument is, of course, related to the climate emergency. She appeals to architects to recognise the 'global and planetary ramifications' behind how we conceive of remoteness and connectedness – the fact that the marble is now distant from its origins does not mean it is disconnected from its making. Philip Ursprung, whose chapter in this book pointed us to the moment of crisis as a provocation and *raison d'être* for criticism, adds:

The crisis is a kind of mirror. It makes one think about everything one's doing. It makes it a great time for criticism since everybody becomes critical. The conditions of the academic world are favourable for this trend. Less teaching, less research, less daily business, less pragmatism, less opportunism . . . more space for critique.

The pandemic age, for Ursprung, beckons a return of criticism to the polemical, away from consensus-building exercises that had begun to replace it. Yet, consensus stubbornly reigns. On 28 July 2021, signatories of 2019's declaration of climate emergency followed their report up with a 2021 edition, bringing to attention the Earth's rapid approach towards several climatic 'tipping points'.⁴ Along with the most recent IPCC report *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, published on 6 August 2021,⁵ the vocabulary of 'tipping points' was swiftly picked up by several news outlets,⁶ most of which cited the contents of the reports with little judgement. The language thus reproduced was one of consensus, where experts 'reaffirm' and 'echo' that which they have already agreed upon 'unequivocally'.⁷ Could the polemical, missing in mass culture, perhaps return in architecture? Ockman charges architecture with an ethical polemic: 'The things we make are part of, products of, much bigger forces. How can individual built work acknowledge these forces, make them palpable? This is the question I want to pose to architects. Can architecture do

this?' To phrase this polemic closer to Ursprung's provocation, is there another, better kind of architectural criticism, or critical architecture that is passionate and uncompromising, towards which we might seek?

BEAUTY

What subjects might such critical architecture constitute? Matthew Mindrup cites the architectural drawings of C.J. Lim as themselves modes of criticism, to which Lilian Chee voices an Asian perspective in the relevance of something seemingly 'neutral' like the architectural drawing as being able to hold more nuanced statements, especially in a political climate where the written mode of criticism is heavily controlled. Chee asks – going back to Ockman's original invocation of the marble plinth – if the aesthetic object is not only a subject of criticism, but criticism itself, for though it may 'ultimately lead to the thorny matter of labour, it is tolerated because it starts somewhere inoffensive', that is, 'beauty'. Chee proposes 'to think about the idea of the design studio and the idea that making is to return to the object itself, so that we might understand the object as a way of criticism'. In so doing, we 'go back into the mechanics that make up the discipline itself'. Thus, to enable a critical architecture – Ockman's 'planetary imagination' – we must go inside architecture and discern the affective performance of writing, drawing, materials, and making work, much like what the second section of this book stipulates. It is a return to that which has historically been rejected as a-critical – aesthetics, the object, the representation, and their making.

Naomi Stead shares this sentiment, reinforcing the lost importance of criticism that is beautiful and aesthetic, that brings 'pleasure'. For Stead, this notion of 'reception' is critical, to be the 'kind of feminist that's manageable and approachable and not adversarial and sits within HR processes

rather than lobbying on the barricades, with placards, outside'. Stead speaks of criticism that targets its structures of oppression within its own remits, possessing what Ockman sees necessary as 'degrees of subterfuge or craftiness'. The dexterity of such criticism navigates the repressive forces of authoritarianism and capitalism alike, disguising itself – as Stead describes herself, as a 'trojan horse' – to avoid becoming 'predetermined by the prevailing system of values'. Yet, further to the repressive forces of ideological institutions, Stead sees such criticism as eclipsing even the determinism of advocacy itself, citing how C.J. Lim's drawings 'produce and provide vision beyond climate change – looking to a future beyond how we might ameliorate climate change in the present'. The advocative potency of pleasurable criticism then extends beyond even itself, to speculate past that which it advocates. The 'mechanics' of this is consistent with what Chee has suggested, as Stead elaborates:

I wondered if there was some correspondence with Joan's point . . . [of] architecture's representational function, if I can quote . . . 'the aesthetic moment within the production process' and that 'architecture may be able to lay bare the process and materials of its own production'. It is perhaps precisely in the aesthetic moment, and I mean aesthetic both in the sense of beauty and in the sense of sensory perception. This is one of the moments in which the . . . critical . . . might happen.

SITUATEDNESS

Shifting this account into a different dimension, and indeed, to situate this conversation beneath the shadow of architecture's other ontologies, Jane Rendell proposes a further consideration of site, challenging what constitutes the object, or even *an* object. She asks: 'Do you

put the building on the side of the site and its institutional rearrangement in gallery form, or let's say the conference form/publication form as the non-site, or the actual building as the institutionalised rearrangement of elements and the site is the site of the raw extraction of materials?' What 'building' then amounts to is a 'series of interconnected sites', placing architecture between remote elements, whilst maintaining their irrevocable connectedness. It is on this matter of interconnectedness that we may, through Rendell, launch into a deeper consideration of Zoom as a site. She states:

This is why yesterday in my talk I referred to Diana Salazar's work on La Guajira and showed the video that she made on the site of the coal mine there and how that links through the electricity generated there right into this Zoom conversation. I wanted to do this so that we can start to make these really important connections between distinct and separate places that have so much impact on carbon futures.

Zoom, the digital, metaphorical conference room, is a site that flattens its connections into a monodimensional space image, much like the flat screen of the computer. This everywhere-nowhere condition of Zoom ultimately obscures the reality of its participants' multiple-sited situatedness. Ockman opines that the Zoom backgrounds created for the conference (and many other virtual events held on the platform) 'make it appear as if we're all coming from the same place, namely a sort of virtual everywhere or nowhere'. Like the Superflat culture of images that Takashi Murakami projected in 2001, the appropriation of the characteristics of the physical in the virtual result in a kind of flattening, where distinct layers press into a single, flat image.⁸ From the multitude of faces against identical backdrops that come together to form the Zoom grid, to the occasional incomprehensible concert of overlain voices, the

signals originating from the remote subsequently reproduced in the local can only be flattened, thereby made into the same.

In this flattening, Ockman wonders if we are given the impression that 'we can overcome the miles and oceans between us simply by Zooming in'. The crossing of oceans recalls a familiar maritime model proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* as 'smooth space par excellence'.⁹ To cross this vast, smooth (and flat) space, a system of measurement was imposed to compartmentalise the ocean into enumerated points and intervals – a system of coordinates, or numbers – thus striating it.¹⁰ The measure is the taking control of territory, so in time, the striated replaces the smooth. Deleuze and Guattari write: 'Whereas in the striated, forms organize a matter, in the smooth, materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them.'¹¹ This is to say, where a space can be measured, forms become important as nodal points, while a space that escapes measurement will instead be defined through its shifting materiality. Zoom space, like most digital platforms, is striated. This striation is nevertheless unique in its evasiveness – Zoom's modes of control and measure can neither be seen nor felt, embedded as these are in an infinitesimal ocean of code, a complexity made of ones and zeros.

GENEROSITY

Yet, optimism persists at the roundtable. Placed in a paradigm of 'generosity', one which Chee identifies being a steadfast sentiment throughout *Remote Practices*, the question remains whether Zoom, the space of community *du jour*, can offer itself as a kind of commons:

I wouldn't say generosity is widespread in academia, even with a platform like Zoom where we might be able to share and give more openly.

... So, if we were to share here on this online space, what does generosity mean? What does collaboration really mean, as it exists now in virtual form? Does it have a place?

With these questions, Chee probes the possibilities of Zoom and what lies beyond, or perhaps before: a remote medium where the smooth becomes imperceptibly striated, where in the very moment it ends we abruptly return to our individual spaces of isolation, going directly from on to off, though easily enough for us to turn on again. Separation or communion, in this sense, remains partial. The separation of mind and body encourages the multiple and the missed: multitasking, multi-time zones, multiple meanings, multiple audiences, and with these, misreadings, mishearings, misinterpretations, misgivings. Indeed, generosity as a critical mode seems a necessity, given the complexities of overlapping contexts and circumstances in the Zoom room, which in a way ironically mirrors the disjunctions and coincidences encountered in the real, physical world.

So, how is generosity realised as a critical mode of practice in the presence of online communality? Rendell offers two words, 'autopoiesis' and 'sympoiesis', for how generosity changes the making of self in relation to others, to making with others. Ursprung expands on what generosity dispels in a system driven by 'competitiveness', which also results in the 'defensive', 'careful', and 'aggressive'. He looks back on the 19th-century salon, where a space of generosity, though exclusive, allowed one to 'share ... and test ideas'. Though the Zoom room has not yet reached this level of communality, Ursprung bemuses that 'there's something generous about this pattern of heads talking to each other on the screen'. Stead brings the word 'bountiful', the notion of an overflowing sharing of things that, though gestural in its remoteness, brings 'humility' to the oft heroically painted architect. It is the act of coming

together and sharing, to stoop below oneself and offer something to the table (or screen) without expectation of return – much like what Rendell, Ursprung, and Stead do here in a notable cessation of monologue.

It is Emmons, however, who offers further consideration of the semantics of generosity itself, tracing its etymology through the Latin *genus* – meaning birth – and onto its relationship with beauty. He explains:

I would like to point out how generous the organisers of this conference, who gave birth to it, have been. The idea of generosity as giving birth also makes me think of Jane's notion of holding and the space that it opens up. I'd also like to suggest another way of thinking about generosity, which might not be entirely self-evident. When Vitruvius made the description of architecture as those three famous elements *firmitas*, *utilitas* and *venustas*. *Utilitas*, or commodity, is one which we tend to translate in modern times as 'function'. But for Vitruvius, *utilitas* meant availability for use, which is a much more generous way of conceiving how a building can be used by people, rather than a function which is imposed upon people. Perhaps one way of thinking about generosity is through rethinking *utilitas* as a generosity for human use which then, rather than being an enemy of beauty, can become an element of beauty.

DISTANCE, AGAIN

The evocation of beauty reminds us of the issue lingering over the nature of criticism. Can criticism, whether of a written or architectural mode, operate in both functional and aesthetic dimensions? Can it be polemical and pleasurable? Can criticism be generous, and make itself available for use? This table seems to believe so. But what of the remote? These questions bring

one back to a critical reflection on remote practice, which Mindrup begins to sketch here:

My questions are inspired by Paul Emmons's talk that asks us to consider how remoteness is a measure of one's connectedness to things or places, since things nearby can be incredibly remote. . . . Professor Ockman, in your overview of the influence of capitalism upon the means of architectural production, you ask if it is possible for architectural form to expose, recollect, and lay bare aspects of architectural production. My question is whether you view connectedness as a condition of architectural form by laying bare or [by] making evident the materials and means of architectural production. How could you see this occurring?

In his article on the risk of remote-work futures, Ed Zitron states that:

Remote work lays bare many brutal inefficiencies and problems that executives don't want to deal with because they reflect poorly on leaders and those they've hired. Remote work empowers those who produce and disempowers those who have succeeded by being excellent diplomats and poor workers, along with those who have succeeded by always finding someone to blame for their failures.¹²

These words – no matter how remote in medium, mode, and subject from the *Remote Practices* roundtable – fill in the invisible parentheses of Mindrup's questions. It is the very remoteness of the architectural form from its aspects of production that lays bare its materials and means, by virtue of its newly revealed absurdity. Like the productive worker juxtaposed against their bosses' unproductive 'bullshit job',¹³ it is at once revelatory and obvious that architecture remains

deeply connected to that from which it is physically removed. If only the conditions were such that what is already there could be seen.

Ockman reminds us that 'Critical distance isn't the same as enforced distance.' Here, however, it is enforced distance that incentivised the channelling of intellectual and critical energy into this topic. It also provoked the assembly of many lived archives which demanded critique and analysis. In the remote's silver linings, disruptiveness, and even infuriating quirks, we question what is at a distance (and what is proximate) to the discipline's existence, relevance, and continuity. Indeed, *Remote Practices* was a meeting that, because of a now universal condition of distance, demonstrated the consequence of uncovering aspects related to remoteness in architecture's past and future.

This conclusion meanders through different topics, resembling more the arc of the monologue-disruption-rhythm of the online conversation which it takes after. It mediates the things said at, and of, the roundtable about both the *concept* of remote practices, and the *Remote Practices* conference as one *exemplar* of such practices. Our experiences living through the pandemic have been described in many ways, but one that sticks goes like this: 'We are flying the plane while building it.' This is also true about constructing a discursive paper about remote practices while living this situation – this intersection of the discursive and the lived complicates the purity and ideologies of a 'remote practice'. Distance enabled by time, and distance procured through space. The latter is enforced because of the pandemic, and hence has become a present context from which we can look back at other forms of distance. The former is still unfolding. Thus, for now, a conclusion of the remote is but a citation of the future.