

Writing in place of speaking

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 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

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

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:

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

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.

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

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. But sometimes the places we write about are not 'real' but those that occur in dreams:

White Linen: I dreamt of the house last night. My mothers house in Cwmgors, south Wales, a place where it always rained in the holidays, that as a kid I resented, but now as it is being taken from me, I already begin to miss. I was in the dining room; the rest of the house was empty except this one room. The furniture was far too big and covered in linen. The air was thick and still, silent. With the curtains drawn, it was very dark, but the linen glowed white. As I went towards the mantel-piece to take a look at myself in the mirror, I saw for the first time in the reflection that the room was full of plants, so alive I could smell moisture still on their leaves⁵

When Jules Wright from the Wapping Project asked me to write a piece about the work of artist Elina Brotherus, I found myself telling stories of my own childhood that corresponded with her photographic images. *White Linen* was one of the texts I included, since as well as often being composed of vast white skies, her work spoke to me of the relationship between nostalgia and anticipation. I started to wonder if including autobiographical detail from a critic's life started to question the distinctions made between writing and criticism. I turned to reread Susan Rubin Suleiman, a writer and literary critic, who has long been interested in the role of personal story-telling in literary criticism and the differences between autobiographical writing and autobiographical criticism:

I define a mode of reading I call 'strong autobiographical' which consists of reading another's story' as if it were one's own'. [...] Perhaps most precious of all, autobiographical reading can lead to more writing – your own. What I call 'strong autobiographical reading' leads, in the best cases, to autobiographical writing. That

⁵ Jane Rendell, 'Longing for the Lightness of Spring', essay on Elina Brotherus, (London: The Wapping Project, November 2001).

*kind of writing is not the same as autobiographical criticism or what some have called personal criticism – or what I am calling mediated autobiography.*⁶

In recent art criticism, there are a few art critics who prefer not to write directly about an artist's work but refer to it by association or by constructing a fictional place from which to consider the work.⁷ This kind of writing, be it autobiographical or fictional, starts to question the distinctions made between art, writing and criticism.

the voice that one cannot control

In August 2000, I was invited to participate at an International Women's University, an extraordinary event that took place in several German cities over the summer months. I was located for a week in the town of Kassel, giving lectures and seminars on work I had published on the topic of gender, space and architecture. I talked about the relationship between feminist theory and architectural space, in particular about the ways in which we write, and the complex interaction between theory and practice in feminist spatial praxis.

During the lecture sessions, held in raked traditional auditoriums with the lights down, I was not happy with the distance of the relationship between the speaker and the audience. The diversity of the women present was incredible, in terms of geography, discipline and practice; some worked in NGO's in India, and there were architects from Cuba and sociologists from Nigeria. Despite the fact that I had been born in the United Arab Emirates, lived in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sudan as a child and traveled widely, I was positioned as English trained architect and academic. I felt uncomfortable. What could these intelligent women learn from me? Who was I to speak to them? I wanted to turn the relationship of tutor and student on its head.

⁶ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking who one is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 8.

⁷See for example the writings of Jeremy Millar.

My way of teaching tends to involve 'not-knowing', refusing to provide answers if I don't have them to give. In order to get to know what 'makes people tick', I often tell stories to shift the power dynamic between teacher and student. The stories I tell and the things I say place me in a somewhat vulnerable state. My hope is that this is a space where students are able to tell me enough about themselves, so that I can understand how to help them transform.⁸

With this in mind, I decided to carry out an experiment for my last lecture session. During coffee breaks I had got to know several of the women well enough to feel that they trusted me in some way. I took the paper I had been about to deliver and cut it up into pieces. The lecture was a reworking of 'Undoing Architecture'. I had recomposed the text into a set of three voices: the voice of the feminist critical theorist, the voice of the conventional architectural practitioner and the voice of the story teller - me - describing the taking apart, through unconventional DIY, of a house I had once lived in. I handed out bits of the text to all the women in the audience. Then I asked them to take up any position in the raked auditorium they wished, and, when they felt ready, to read aloud the piece of writing they had been given, but in their mother tongue(s).

Slowly people started to read, but in English, in quiet and reverend tones, struggling to pronounce the words correctly. It was beautiful to listen to so many female voices filling the lecture space rather than my own, so many different tones and intonations, but the words were still mine. My own writing rang in my ears. I had expected a delirious cacophony, an overturning of the lecturer and lectured-at relationship. But somehow I had failed to turn things around, to set western academia on its head; instead I had

⁸This is nothing new in pedagogic practice. See for example, Phyllis Crème and Celia Hunt, 'Creative Participation in the Essay Writing Process', (unpublished paper); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: education as the Practice of Freedom*, (London: Routledge, 1994); Forbes Morlock, 'The Story of the Ignorant School master/The Adventures of Telemachus, For Example', Caroline Rooney, (ed.), *Knowledge, Learning and Migration*, vol. 19, *The Oxford Literary Review*, (1998), pp. 105-132; Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, 'Behind the Mask: A Psychoanalytic Perspective in Interaction in the Design Studio', *Journal of Architectural Education*, (May 2000), pp. 207-215; Jane Trowell, 'Engaged Pedagogies', *Social Justice and Art History: an investigation and some proposals*, *Engage Eight*, (Spring 2001), pp. 37-44.

inadvertently reinforced my own position of authority. I had not anticipated how fearful the students would be of causing offence by misusing my words. I had offered them a chance to play with the words of the teacher, but I had not provided a safe place for experimentation. How could these women take my writing apart, when all week they had listened silently to MY lectures?

That afternoon we made a 'confessional construction'. My request that the audience speak my words to deconstruct my text made me aware that the positions we take up as writer and reader, as speaker and listener, as teacher and student, are difficult to transform. What may be a liberational standpoint or voice for one is not necessarily so for another. Much of Jacques Derrida's work has been a defense of writing against speech: he discusses how speech, at the expense of writing, has been prioritized for being closer to the presence of meaning. It is in writing that Derrida finds a distance from presence and so a potential for slippage in meaning to occur. Mieke Bal summarizes Derrida's position as outlined in *Dissemination* this way:

Dissemination is based on three tenets related to the interplay of contemporary semiotics and deconstruction that challenge art history's pursuit of origins; intertextuality, entailing the dispersal of origins; polysemy, entailing the undecidability of meaning; and the shifting location of meaning, entailing the dispersal of agency.⁹

It is this uncertainty of meaning found in writing that Derrida celebrates. But rather than focus on the misreadings possible through writing; what about the misunderstandings possible in speech? What about the inability of the speaker to say what s/he 'really means'? Mladen Dolar has critiqued Derrida for depriving the voice of ambiguity, by 'reducing it to the ground' of illusory presence. As Dolar has commented, the voice is not only the voice of self-presence but also that voice that one cannot control.¹⁰

⁹ Mieke Bal, *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, (Amsterdam; G and B Arts International, 2001), p. 67.

¹⁰ Mladen Dolar, 'The Object Voice'; Renata Salacl and Slavoj Zizek, (eds.), *Sic 1: Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 15.

the very act of saying

In the summer of 2000, a month or so before going to Kassel, I received a letter from David Blamey asking me to write a piece for his book on travel. I was keen to include some of the ideas I had been working with around angels as messengers and metaphors of encounter. David was not too keen on this suggestion. And he was not alone. A number of people I had spoken to about my interest in angels as interdisciplinary travelers were apprehensive. For them the angel held too many theological trappings. So I decided instead to tell some travel stories of my own about my childhood and my understanding of the relationship between feminist theory, teaching and architecture.

*I was born in Al Mahktoum hospital, Dubai in the 'Middle East'. As a girl I lived in Sudan, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. My movements followed the pattern of my dad's work. Unlike many children in similar situations, I was not put into a boarding school at the age of 11, but came back to live in England with my mum and sister. I say, 'came back'. The phrase implies that I was coming back to somewhere I had already been. But I had never lived in England before. It was my parents' country or origin, but not mine. I never felt at home back (t)here. But I have never felt at home anywhere.*¹¹

In November 2001, I performed a shortened version of 'Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other' as a walk around the University of North London. This was part of 'taking place', a one-day event and the name of a group of writers, artists and architects, who had been meeting for a year to discuss the relationship of feminist theory and practice. Each member of the group of ten offered a piece of work to an invited audience, varying from a workshop, to a talk, to a walk, to a meal. I attempted to locate my piece of writing within the space of an institution where I had taught architecture a few years earlier. Different parts of the text were 'read aloud' at various locations; a section on home at the pigeon holes, one on architectural education in a studio and so on...

¹¹ Jane Rendell, 'Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other', David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There and Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, (London: Open Editions, 2002).

My practice, my writing, is concerned with the ways in which we construct relationships with others without losing ourselves. I call these writings 'confessional constructions'. This one was originally written for David Blamey for his soon to be published book called Here, There, Elsewhere. It was entitled 'Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other'.¹²

My favorite spaces in the building were the toilets, partly because they were the place I would go between tutorials to regain energy and pause for reflection. Despite the fact these six toilets were all used by the staff and students of a large school of architecture certain aspects of their design – each cubicle was sealed with low lighting, an individual basin and a mirror – created an intimate and private setting. I decided to place candles by the mirrors, to lock myself in a cubicle and to whisper the words of 'Closer' through a microphone. My voice was conveyed via a number of loudspeakers placed in the roof space, the listeners squeezed into the cubicles:

I've recently got close to an artist. In the days and months as we moved towards each other he sent me a series of postcards. Some were of landscapes, others of land art. All are reference points of our mutual topography – a mapping of the merging of our emotional, creative, intellectual worlds.

Before this transformation, I wrote about his work, as an independent critic (or so I thought). Recently he told me that he found it hard to recognise his work in my comments. What are the reasons for this lack of recognition? As someone in love with him, he was sceptical about my ability to be objective. But in my opinion the critic can never be objective, there is always something about the self at stake.¹³

¹²'Confessional Constructions' a verbal presentation of Jane Rendell, 'Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other', David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There and Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, (London: Open Editions, 2002) performed as part of 'Taking Place' at the University of North London, November 2001.

¹³'Confessional Constructions' a verbal presentation of Jane Rendell, 'Travelling the Distance/Encountering the Other', David Blamey (ed.), *Here, There and Elsewhere: : Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, (London: Open Editions, 2002) performed as part of 'Taking Place' at the University of North London, November 2001.

The intention of the piece as a whole was to explore the tensions and ambiguities that exist in feminist spatial thinking and writing between the personal and the public, the autobiographical and the professional, emotional subjectivity and academic objectivity. I saw the walk itself not as a piece of performance art but as a piece of performed writing, a series of critical interventions throughout the building in sites that for me brought together personal reflection and institutional pressure. 'Closer', the section that I read aloud in the toilets, dealt with the role of the art critic in general, but was based specifically on the relationship between myself and my partner. The piece began with a list of the postcards he sent me at the fledgling stage of our relationship. I read out the names of artworks shown on the postcards and the dates on which they were sent, but revealed nothing more.

With one exception, the participants of 'taking place' were women, but a few men were present to help cook, serve wine and lend moral support. My partner was only able to come along to hear my work. His response surprised me; it was not what I had expected. He was deeply offended that I had chosen, in the toilets of an institution among a group of strangers, to use messages given in confidence. But in a way this was precisely the point of the work - my intention was to juxtapose the intimate and the institutional. For me the soothing space of these toilets provided a safe environment in which I could be private in the institution. For him, the banal setting of the toilets devalued treasured words. He had given me these words without any expectation that they would end up being read out in the toilets of an academic institution. He started to worry about 'where' what he said to me could end up. How far could the act of speaking transform the content of the text? As Italo Calvino puts it: *...writing consists no longer in narrating but in saying that one is narrating, and what one says becomes identified with the very act of saying.*¹⁴ I had got caught up in the act of speaking itself, rather than in focusing on what I was saying.

the 'I' who is writing

¹⁴ Italo Calvino, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 7.

In April 2002 Brigid McLeer asked me to produce a piece of writing a wall she was curating outside an artists' bookshop. Her request was for a 'page' that would be pasted to the wall for a month. Initially I was concerned with making a 'site specific intervention'. I wanted to research the history of the construction of the building and insert a text into the shop that suggested connections between the material construction of the wall and the ways in which we make our own edges as people. But Brigid made it clear to me that she was less interested in the physical construction of the text and more concerned with the ways in which I might explore my own position as the subject of my own writing. How would the public placing of the 'page' on the wall effect what I might write?

*In 1989, on the way from Austin, Texas to Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, I met a Chicano artist, who gave me a book, *The Passionate Nomad*. The book was the diary of Isabelle Eberhardt, a young woman from an affluent French family who spent the later part of her short life disguised as an Arab man wandering the deserts of northern Africa. She died aged 28, on 21 October 1904, in a flash flood at Ain-Sefra. Her diary is one of my favourite books. I too have had addictive relationships with food and travel.*¹⁵

I wanted to reveal something really difficult and problematic on that wall. But finally I merely hinted at the fact that I had suffered from an addictive relationship with food. Who hasn't? If I avoided making a confession, then what did emerge through discussion with Brigid was a new way of working with the layout of the text on the page and my place within it. The main statement reprinted above was interwoven with reflections upon what it means to confess. I placed the footnotes down the side of the page, numbered from bottom to top, to read upwards as one builds a wall. These contained architectural specifications by an architect friend Deborah Millar about how to construct walls and openings that touched upon my own interest in whether the confessional construction' was a revealing or a masking of the self.

¹⁵Jane Rendell, 'Confessional Constructions', for LLAW, curated by Brigid McLeer, for BookArtBookShop, London, April 2002.

[Image].

I discovered that the way a writer positions herself in her writing is architectural and has implications for the way in which the writer meets the reader. Certain forms of writing make walls, others create meeting points; some stories close down possibilities for discussion, while others invite participation. Italo Calvino, for example, has explicitly explored the relationship the writer has to his/her writing in terms of position – where a writer stands – inside and/or outside a text.

Maybe the critical analysis I am looking for is one that does not aim directly at the ‘out-of-doors’ but, by exploring the ‘indoors’ of the text and going deeper and deeper in its centripetal movement, succeeds in opening up some unexpected glimpses of that ‘out-of-doors’ – a result that depends less on the method itself than on the way one uses the method.¹⁶

In another essay, Calvino discusses the places writers occupy in relation to their writing in terms of their different identities as subjects or ‘I’s:

And in these operations the person ‘I’, whether explicit or implicit, splits into a number of different figures: into an ‘I’ who is writing and an ‘I’ who is written, into an empirical ‘I’ who looks over the shoulder of the ‘I’ who is writing and into a mythical ‘I’ who serves as a model for the ‘I’ who is written. The ‘I’ of the author is dissolved in the writing. The so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing: it is the product and the instrument of the writing process.¹⁷

I have always considered autobiographical writing to be confessional, part of a process of revelation, one that uncovers the truth beneath. Uncovering often involves being brave and prepared to loose or at least question authorial control. But once a story is repeated the fear seems to dissipate and over time the personal voice reclaims an

¹⁶ Italo Calvino, ‘Literature as Projection of Desire’, *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 58.

¹⁷ Italo Calvino, ‘Cybernetics and Ghosts’, *The Literature Machine*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 15.

authorial position. The use of 'I' places me in a position of authority, even when I am discussing emotions I am not necessarily comfortable revealing. This concerns me.

and somewhere else she is told

*In 1989, on the way from Austin, Texas to Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, I met a Chicano artist, who gave me a book, *The Passionate Nomad*. The book was the diary of Isabelle Eberhardt, a young woman from an affluent French family who spent the later part of her short life disguised as an Arab man wandering the deserts of northern Africa. She died aged 28, on 21 October 1904, in a flash flood at Ain-Sefra. Her diary is one of my favourite books. I too have had addictive relationships with travel.¹⁸*

I reused exactly this paragraph (with one tiny but significant change) as the starting point for a recent piece of work for a collection of essays on architecture and transculturation within a Latin American context. At first I didn't believe I had anything to say on the subject, but the request brought to mind the wonderful journey I had made ten years before through Central America. I had been travelling alone, and was not really desirous of company, but on a number of occasions certain encounters occurred which were characterised through misunderstandings. Where I am still not really sure what was meant or even what was said.

Composing the text for 'Architecture and Transculturation' also provided a chance for me to develop a further understanding of 'spatial writing', a term I had become fond of using. It seemed to me that each of the stories I was telling had only been possible because of the spaces they took place in. Certain forms of architecture, the internalised space of a church, the two-way traffic on a bridge, the dissonance of a market square, had offered possibilities for certain kinds of encounter to occur. Writing about what had occurred was not only the tracing of a story, but the creation of a new place in its own right.

¹⁸Jane Rendell, 'And somewhere else she is told', Felipe Hernandez, Mark Millington and Iain Borden, (eds.), *Architecture and Transculturation in Latin America* (in press).

Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.¹⁹

I am interested in writing that is architectural in form as well as in content, for example, writing as a bridge rather than writing about a bridge. In a collection of critical essays, A S Byatt examines her fascination with 'topological fictions', fictions where the term topological means 'both mathematical game-playing, and narratives constructed with spatial rather than temporal images'.²⁰ Byatt names certain works by Primo Levi, Italo Calvino and George Perec as the most interesting examples of this kind of writing.²¹ For me, these authors have different ways of making topological fictions, or, spatial writing. While Calvino often uses combination and permutation as strategies for constructing the shape of stories, Levi might draw on an existing empirical structure as the meta-narrative and Perec's observations and descriptions of spaces produce a fictional place. In discussing his own interest in 'topological fictions', Calvino refers to a review of labyrinthine narratives in the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Robbe Grillet, which describes how, by placing narratives inside one another, these authors make places where it is easy to get lost.²²

The explanation is obvious: The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of each other for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 5.

²⁰ A S Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 139-141.

²¹ See Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, (London: Vintage Classics, 1998) and Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, (London: Collins Harvell, 1992).

²² Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Topological Structures in Modern Literature', *Sur*, (May-June 1966).

favourable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost.²³

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.²⁴ Importance shifts from the one who is telling, or 'articulating', to where this articulation is taking place, the 'topos of enunciation'.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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 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

²³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 53.

²⁴ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 150.

²⁵ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 162.

²⁶ 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.

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.

speaking in place of writing

Jane Rendell

July 2002.