esiringPractices
Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary

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Venise
Victor Burgin showed his video Venise. The video is constructed from simultaneous and parallel relationships: between the cities of San Francisco and Marseilles; between a detective and the woman he is hired to follow; between Hitchcock's film Vertigo and the French crime novel on which the film is based; between memory and place. Venise is basically "about" the production of an identity in relation to places, the history of those places, personal memory, and other people. Commissioned by the Ville de Marseille in 1993, Venise was first screened outside of France at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1994.

Victor Burgin: The moderator of this symposium, Helen Mallinson began by commenting on the heterogeneity of the backgrounds of the participants. She concluded that they were all coming from different places. Perhaps I should begin, then, by saying a little of where I came from. The last time I spoke in London in an architectural theory context was at the Architectural Association in Bedford Square. That was in 1987. The paper I gave on that occasion was published, in the same year, in AA Files. The title of the paper was "Geometry and Abjection": on the one hand, rational and nationalist schemas of space; on the other, the desiring entropic body which attempts to inhabit them. I moved to the US in 1988 and contributed to a symposium in the School of Architecture at Princeton University, for which I suggested the title 'Sexuality and Space'. So again, pretty much the same sort of problematic. I gave a paper on that occasion called "Perverse Space". So I thought that a symposium called "Desiring Practices" had to be right up my street, because that is where I am coming from. I've gathered my theoretical writings on that problematic in the book that Bert Hallam mentioned—in/Different Spaces: place and memory in visual culture—which will be published by the University of California Press in 1996. I do not intend to read a chapter from that book now, what I do intend to do is show a video. The video is about desire in and for a city, and, in a sense, desire of a city—in this case, the desire of the city of Marseilles to be represented. In France, the government gives money to cities to hand out to artists to do things in the cities. Often, much as in Karen Burns' remark about the visiting architect who rides into town and rides out again having "fixed" things, the artist will ride into town, sign the city with his own particular signature and ride out again. He or she may then go to other cities and leave the same

signature on that city. In the late 1960s I wrote a paper called "Situational Aesthetics" in which I argued for more of what John Cage called "responsibility", hyphenating 'response' and 'ability', the ability to respond to specific circumstances. So, how to respond to Marseilles? As I say it was a commission to make a work about a city. I was in Paris in 1992, teaching at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and I got a phone call from Marseilles to ask if I was interested in going there the following year to make a work. I said I would be interested and they said: "Well, in that case, could you tell us now what it is you intend to do". Off the top of my head, I said I wouldn't mind doing something about the relationship of San Francisco to Marseilles. There was a pause, and then the person on the other end of the line said: "What relationship?" But the idea of a relationship between the two cities has an immediate sort of plausibility. On the topographical level, they are both cities built on hills that surround bays. They both have polyglot, heterogeneous, multicultural populations. There was also something else which interested me. Having got into the practice of hopping between California and Europe, I have started to think of the Atlantic pretty much as a large interior lake—like Lake Erie—in the space of European and US cultural hegemony. But if you leave the Bay of San Francisco, and head out to sea, you head towards a radically different cultural sphere, that of Asia. And if you leave by the Bay of Marseilles you head out into the radically different cultural sphere of Africa. So I was interested in the marginality of those two cities—in that always relative sense. The tape was made for Marseilles, it has a number of references which are very specific to Marseilles and which may very well escape people who aren't familiar with Marseilles and its history.

Something about Marseilles itself, very briefly. It's probably the oldest recorded French city. It is believed to have been settled first by the Phoenicians around about 600 B.C. Other people from the Mediterranean basin followed, Greeks, Romans, people from Corsica, from Spain, Italy, people from Northern Africa, from sub-Saharan Africa, and then from further afield—like Asia, and more recently, from Eastern Europe. So Marseilles has always been a brocchia of different languages, races, ethnicities and so on. Marseilles got rich in the nineteenth century on the proceeds of the French colonial adventure. In 1830 the French took the port of Algiers, and then the rest of Algeria. From 1830, until it gained independence in 1962, Algeria was a protectorate and then a département of France. Marseilles became rich on the proceeds of the port trade—the shipping, taxes, and so on. It also profited from the industrial processing of raw materials coming from Africa—sugar, oil and so on. If you go to Harrods, you can still find Savon de Marseille, Marseilles soap. All of that business more or less came to an end, almost abruptly, with independence. Now until that time, Marseilles hadn't developed in the way that most French cities have developed: with the rich centre ville and then the banlieue, the suburbs,
which contain the largest number of young, unemployed, recent immigrants and so on. Marseilles never developed that centre/periphery opposition, it has always been a sort of aggregate of village societies, and the identity of those little village societies has been centred upon an ethnic identity, a racial identity, a language. Yet, nevertheless, there was always a politics in Marseilles which cut across those different racial and ethnic identities and that was the politics of the workplace. In France, Marseilles was always known as 'la ville populaire'—the working class city—and it was the politics of the workplace which dominated until the beginning of the 1980s. In 1982, Gaston Defere, who had been socialist mayor of Marseilles for twenty-two years, lost his seat. In 1984, the first National Front deputy was elected to the Marseilles Assembly, and what had been a purely working class politics gave way to an increasingly racist politics—which exploited the situation that essentially began in 1962, with the end of colonisation, when the wealth of industrial employment declined very rapidly and when the population simultaneously increased by some 1.5 million of pied-noirs (French citizens of North African birth) who came to settle in and around Marseilles. So that was the background to the situation that I went into.

I went into that situation in Marseilles at a time when they were literally trying to re-invent the city. They had a lot of money which Mitterand had hard-wired into Marseilles and there was no way that—that after the decline of the Socialists—it could be taken away from the city. So they were ripping Marseilles apart, reconstructing its urban fabric; but at the same time, they had this problem of the perception of Marseilles, both within Marseilles and outside of Marseilles, the sort of image you see in the movie The French Connection. Marseilles has always been considered to be a criminal, dangerous sort of city. I felt that it was one of my tasks to contribute to the re-vamping of the myth of Marseilles. Basically, there were two issues to address. One was the poor self-image of Marseilles, of particular concern at a time when Marseilles was trying to resurrect itself from a sort of economic and cultural death. The other was the issue of racism, which was being expressed there, as so often here, in terms of immigration. There are two voices you will hear on the video. Both of these voices speak with an accent marked by an origin elsewhere. The first voice is a man's voice who speaks with an English accent (this is a cheap production). The second voice is a woman's voice, a native French speaker, but who clearly speaks with an Arabic accent. Again, thinking about Karen Burns' presentation, and the issues of marginality and the ideologies which construct our built environment, I would ask you to look at the mural on the wall behind you. I think Burns' remarks, and my own video, were addressed to a world in which, hopefully, that particular view of the world will no longer hold.

Projection of Venice, 1993. (French, English subtitled. PAL, U-matic SP, colour, 29 mins.)

Discussion

Question from the audience: I'd like to start with one observation actually. It's a very, very beautiful film and it seemed to me to sum up both the beauty and the horror of identity. It's something that is completely wonderful and also something that is completely terrifying. When Paul [Finch] makes a suggestion that we infiltrate the corridors of power, there's this terrible sense of loss: in order to save architecture, one has to give up being an architect. And Karen Burns comes up with a similar dichotomy in a sense: in order to become more human as architects, we have to relinquish architecture and think about building. And it seems to me to come back to this crisis of identity—architecture is something that we want and yet it is something that binds us in the past.

Question from the audience: Despite the very lively differences of this morning's presentations, one theme did tightly connect all of them, and that is the particular virtue, and the particular value that is put on being in the peripheral and the marginal situation. But by doing so, one does tend to pull the marginal towards the centre and thus to rob it of its alleged virtues, the virtues afforded by being on the outside looking in. I think my question is: how much is this current respect for the peripheral situation really just a strategy of making the best of a bad job, or does the peripheral situation have an absolute value of its own which can and must be preserved?

Paul Finch: I think it's a very appropriate question in Britain, this peripheral little island which used to be a centre, and we now have absolutely no idea whether it is a centre or not. I think that we all started from different directions and, as you pointed out, that made us all the same. I have always liked that Michael Graves line that one of the effects of postmodern architecture was that you got the same difference everywhere. That was presented in those images [in the video] where one city starts to fade into another and one identity starts to fade into another. It seems that the interesting thing about the centre and the periphery is whether the periphery is only defined as a periphery in relation to that centre or whether the peripherals join and make their own connections. A physical example I would give of that is what happened to Atlanta, where you have a downtown and peripheral areas which are only defined in relation to downtown, but then all of a sudden they make highways between them and downtown is now in the peripherals and it is the centre which has become the periphery. I think it is that kind of game which goes on—well, not a game—that thing that happens in cities is a reflection of our own relationships with people and in a sense the way of describing that. The film we just saw is as good a way of describing that similarity, or parallel, as I think one can make. I don't think you can do it in architecture as such.
Karen Burns: I'm not actually happy about the label 'marginal' in relation to the paper I presented. I think one of the interesting things about the essay by Peter Myers is that it was commissioned by the Australian government, which isn't a marginal institution of power in Australia, and I think that work has been published in a book which is internationally distributed. Partly, I looked at that material because it's not really marginal work, the kind of consultancy work that is undertaken by architects a lot, and so that's probably what I would have to say about that label.

Victor Burgin: I would again invite you to look at the mural which dominates this theatre. Because again it's an image which speaks volumes to that particular mind-set in which there is a single centre and there are peripheries to this centre. What we see in the centre of the mural is indeterminately, I guess, the House of Commons, or the British Courts of Law, but it's certainly the centre of power and authority. And then off around the edge we have these literally 'marginal' people: Asians, Africans, indigenous Australians and so on. The video I made progressed through 'dissolves' and, thematically, it represented a dissolving of differences between cities and identities, and attempted to—in a jargon word much used over but I'll use it anyway—'deconstruct' the binarism of centre and margin, of self and other. This is a time when Marseille is trying to re-invent itself, a time when western capitals and western countries, in general, are trying to re-invent themselves. Britain is certainly no exception to this and Paul summed up that existential quandary for Britain. In this period of Le Pen and 'France for the French' I think it is really essential, politically, to continually focus on the impossibility of immutable difference, and on the contingency of identity, and on the fact that no identity exists as an essence within anything but is only ever forged in relation to another. The relation can be amorous—a desiring practice—or it can be antagonistic, or it can be both at the same time. It is only through addressing these issues, learning to tolerate the pain of that condition, that I think we have a hope in human politics. I don't think this is a matter of opportunism or fashion; I think it's rather a matter of looking at what's happening in the world, looking at what's happening to us and trying to find ways of representing it so that we can do something about it. Marshall McLuhan was fond of saying that we don't know who discovered water, but we can be damn sure it wasn't a fish. The point being, of course, that when you are breathing in the very condition of your being, it's difficult to get a critical distance on that condition. So I think that the work of a symposium like this, and the sorts of cultural workers who are involved in symposiums like this, is not to tell people anything they don't know already, but rather to try to find a way of representing what they know, so that they know they know it.

Paul Finch: There's a strange thing about anonymity in the city. The point about the medieval city was precisely its anonymity, which gave it its desirability. There's that old tag 'town air makes free', and it most certainly did. Those city walls were not just to keep out strangers, they were also to keep out kings, and other peoples' armies. The desirability of anonymity in the city ebbs and flows, sometimes you want to be anonymous and sometimes you don't. It seems to me that a place like Marseilles is both anonymous and marked at the same time, which comes back to your binary about the way the architecture immediately marks something as something, and not as something else. And of course the problem for black immigrants, and certainly not for white ones, in the European city is that in one sense they cannot be anonymous. I suppose by extension one might say in relation to gender, if you think about the City of London, those medieval guilds, the point was that you couldn't tell from looking at somebody on the street—you could tell by class what they might be, whether they were a burgher, or whether they weren't—but you couldn't tell whether they were members of the livery company of fishmongers, or whether they were involved in leather business, or the glass business or whatever it was. But of course they were all men, and as that has changed, so these ideas of peripherals again emerge. There's that old thing about people who taught in architecture schools about cyberspace being on the outer edges of reality, whereas what you really wanted to know was more details on fished timbers if you please. But, of course, the people dealing with cyberspace were the ones who were actually at the centre, and now that has become very apparent because that model, the city wall... what on earth does it mean when you can speak to somebody on the internet as though they are as close as you are to me?

Question from the audience: Could I refer to last night's talk which dealt with the picturesque and cyber-reality? The question I have is: is the pain that you are actually talking about to do with trying to force ideas of centrality when we have got a cultural perception which actually allows us to be multi... more like a Nietzschean image of a multiplicity of points, but this liberation of spatial understanding from a three dimensional to a multidimensional idea of space is actually part of everybody's life, even though the language we use does give us moments of acute disquiet. And in terms of architecture, and the loss of architecture, there is something about the edge which is not the other side, or looking back to the picturesque but actually maintaining a position on this point of origination—which does mean we lose our personal identity, but at that moment, briefly, or in an infinite amount of time one is actually making universal artistic sense.

Victor Burgin: Well, what I hear in what you are saying, one of the issues it raises for me, is that—as we know from modern physics—we cannot talk about space
without talking about time. When I give the example of Marseilles as an aggregate of village societies, then that's a spatial picture of these many points of which you spoke, and differences between the points: cultural differences, linguistic differences and so on. But, of course, the other thing that you have to bear in mind with the spatial picture is that the histories and the memories which pass through those points are different. So we are passing not only from a spatial picture which included the model of the centre and the periphery, but also passing into a different temporality, a different picture of time in which it is no longer a question of history as a single linear story—and neither his story nor her story—but rather a picture of a multiplicity of simultaneously existing histories and memories. To give a practical example: in North America, now, I can't imagine any more difficult position to be in than a history teacher in a grade school. What history do you teach? What is the 'history of America'? Now against what I have characterised as the anxiety and the pain of that recognition, we have the blind, brutal assertion of power of the politicians. So Bob Dole, running for the Republican nomination in the primaries at the moment, is saying: "We've had enough of hyphenated Americanism. We're all Americans, so let's have no more of this African-American, Asian-American, Spanish-American nonsense. We're all Americans". Well, go tell that to the kids in the ghetto. So I think it is necessary to re-represent in different ways what we already know in order to find a way of dealing with the world as it exists, and not the world as it exists in the fantasy of those in power.

**Karen Burns:** Could I re-describe that word 'loss' in another way? I'm not trying to be a Pollyanna here, but 'transformation' might be another word that one would use instead of 'loss', and in that transformation there are possibilities that we can't envisage now and that we shouldn't foreclose upon. In that transformation of architecture there may be positive things that will come out of that experience, and so I'm not sure that we should hold on to the past with this tremendous sense of loss, but try and somehow negotiate this transformation and expect that there will be some positive outcomes.

**Helen Mallinson:** Well, this is what interested me about the film, this kind of balance between the beauty and the horror, because in a way the story had a kind of tragic consequence, a tragic outcome. You know, if we wish to transform the situation, whatever it is, political situation or whatever, then the loss is inevitable, and yet what are the possibilities for that transformation? There is a kind of a sense of beauty in the process of loss, because the process of loss is also an opening out, it's also an opening out of new possibilities. There's this kind of incredible sense, like in the way you shot a lot of the scenes of passage through the city, that suddenly time transforms into something else and you begin to take on another kind of sensuality.

**Paul Finch:** The question of time in relation to these histories is interesting because the only tracks on which that might work is chronology. One could be saying, "Yes, of course, there are alternative histories which you could take from any perspective. They are moving at different speeds." But I think it is interesting to think about what are the physical manifestations of any of those histories, because they all will have physical manifestations, and curiously enough the one which is simplest, but most undervalued, not least in schools of architecture, is the history—one might even say the archaeology—of cities and planning and buildings themselves. Let us take the Houses of Parliament, that model of a city, you can tell a series of parallel histories about that, quite apart from the ones told in terms of its construction and formal architectural design. Ultimately, a building embodies everything, it embodies the power relations, the gender relations, the economic relations. It is only a question of how far you can get into that building to find out what it shows you. It seems to me that for any culture to examine its own architecture it needs to undertake something that is both literal, metaphorical and historical at one and the same time. It seems to me a sort of madness that schools of architecture have marginalised the history of their own subject to such a tragic degree, when in many ways it is the history of architecture which is one of things that architects most have to offer as an explanation and even a legitimisation of what they have done in the past—and why they think they might have something to offer a particular community now.

**Question from the audience:** This is a question directed at Victor Burgin whose film I found very provocative, but the question I had, really, was that the film seems to be directed towards the notion of dissolving difference, which I think is very provocative within this particular symposium. And something which came to mind from a comment that Paul Finch ascribed to Michael Graves—"that there is the same difference everywhere"—it brought to mind the final comment that comes in Frederic Jameson's recent book, in the essay "The Constraints of Post-Modernism in the Seeds of Time", where he is basically taking apart Kenneth Frampton's article on critical regionalism and exposing the paradoxes within that. The conclusion he comes to is that the notion of difference, in the sense of critical regionalism, is in some way sanctioned by the very universal capitalism that it is out to call into question. I think if you transpose that to the context of a symposium about gender and about difference in this particular situation... I'm just interested in what Victor would have to say about the role of difference in the question of gender.

**Victor Burgin:** The term 'difference' of course, like a lot of other abstract terms, itself functions differently within different discourses. The people you invoked, who speak from within architectural theory, probably construe and construct difference rather differently from the way in which it's constructed in my own
favoured methodological discourse, which is psychoanalytic theory. The book that I have just finished rests upon a basis of psychoanalytic theories, and when I think of difference it's always within those terms. The theory in the book is psychoanalytic, and the context is that of North America, of modern American cities. The context is also the politics of the American university today, which is a politics of identity. I think that this is probably true, increasingly so, for Europe although America seems to have got there first. The class politics with which we entered the twentieth century have given way, by the end of the twentieth century, to a politics of identity. The consequences of that politics of identity in the US today is no better expressed than in the O. J. Simpson trial, and the result of that trial. It seems that even the possible range of meanings of a criminal trial have now become totally displaced into the arena of identity politics and the re-vindication of past wrongs—such that the actual circumstances of the case become irrelevant, and the protagonists in the case become signifiers in another drama, a greater historical drama. If you will forgive me, this slogan which keeps getting repeated at this symposium—"it's always the same difference everywhere"—sounds to me sort of tired and cynical. It doesn't actually help me think about anything. I'm interested in how, precisely, we form an identity across a number of instances of experiences of difference. The difference, originally, from the body of our mother. Then the difference ascribed to us in gender terms, and the consequences of that. And then racial, ethnic, class differences, and so on. At the time I was growing up, the complexity of this picture was largely obscured by the shadow of monolithic ideologies. On the one hand, the ideology of the State, of 'little England', and on the other hand the ideologies of the Labour movement—which resulted in a sort of 'us and them' simplification. Then the kind of feminism which saw gender only by analogy with class... What I am interested in in contemporary theory is the attempt to get beyond those sorts of simplistic pictures and to represent the complexity of multiple differences. Not in order to solve the puzzle of identity, I think it's insoluble, but rather to communicate the sense that to live is to attempt to solve it.

Helen Malinson: One of the issues that seems to be coming up... You know you talked about the relief of getting rid of monolithic structures in one way or another, and this issue of the kind of complexity of identities that dissolve and transform. You are talking about the need to represent our position, and the difficulty is how do you represent it? How do you spatialise a new situation, how do you reinterpret the sets of relationships that we are looking forward to being somehow more open, more free, more democratic, more tolerant—a way that allows specific identities to be maintained, in order that you have a basis on which to differentiate but which does not homogenise them or crush them. It is interesting listening to the spatial models that people are coming up with in their papers. Kind of binary systems, centres and peripheries and the types of fragmentation, dissolves or transformations. It's this question of representing this spatial set of analogies that I think is quite curious to this debate.

Karen Burns: I would just like to say that I think one of the things we have to do is reconceptualise our notion of what built space is, which I think means leaving that notion that it is purely an object and thinking about the relations between space and the people who live within it, which is what the work of Myers does.

Victor Burgin: There is a rider I'd like to add to that. Perhaps because I haven't been in London for a while, I'm just astonished by the way it's collapsing under the weight of its own populations. I'm living at the moment with my sister out in Stoke Newington and it took me an hour and a half to get up to this particular centre. That's the time it takes to me to get from my home in San Francisco to my office in Santa Cruz, seventy-five miles away. There has been talk of cyberspace, the internet and satellite television. But none of it helps me to get my body across London. This is one of the most poignant architectural situations right now: the metropolis is setting as solid as concrete, while the only architecture we cross freely is virtual and disembodied.