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This is the published version of a paper published in *Footprint*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Burroughs, B., Grillner, K., Frichot, H., Bonnevier, K. (2017)

Between Delft and Stockholm.

*Footprint*, 11(2): 119-128

<https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.11.2.1905>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kth:diva-220541>

Interview

## Between Delft and Stockholm

Brady Burroughs (BB), Katarina Bonnevier (KB), Katja Grillner (KG), H el ene Frichot (HF)

Initial questions by Dirk van den Heuvel and Robert Gorny (FP)

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**FP:** With our trans/queer issue of *Footprint* we aim to break a spell that seems quite tenacious in architecture, namely the highly male-dominated, gender-biased and heteronormative framework of our professional practices, language and thinking. Luckily, we witness an increasing effort to break with old hegemonies that stem from binary oppositions and universalisations that overcode difference.

As we see it, you managed to develop a most interesting and inspiring approach to architecture and writing in relation to performances and the performative, making your own work an example of 'how to do things with words'. It seems to be specific to the School of Architecture at The Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm (KTH), especially your group *Fatale* for feminist architecture theory and practice, the *Mycket* collaboration, and the *Critical Studies in Architecture* group.

To start from here, with the feminist problem regarding a politics of location, could you situate this approach? Rather than answering the Freudian question 'where it began', could you elaborate in which 'milieu' your approaches came about and crossed one another and converged?

**KG:** Interestingly, I think, the experimental approaches towards a kind of performative critical spatial writing that have come to flourish in our environment at KTH, with many examples also from colleagues other than ourselves, for each one of us

also draw distinct lines back to other key locations and situations in which we have been embedded and that have strongly contributed to our individual passion, courage and curiosity for pushing boundaries and shifting perspectives. These involve friends, teachers and forerunners such as Jennifer Bloomer, Jane Rendell, Alberto P erez-Gomez, Karen Burns, and Julieanna Preston.<sup>1</sup> This is important: each of us has brought to the KTH 'milieu' our own specific poetic modes and intriguing queries.

I was in some way the first of subsequent publications at KTH with my PhD-dissertation 'Ramble, Linger and Gaze' from the year 2000, which 'writes' an eighteenth-century landscape garden through a philosophical dialogue between two eighteenth-century characters and my own alter ego.<sup>2</sup> Throughout my PhD-training at KTH, I had also been offered good opportunities to pursue experiments in spatial writing with our architecture students in studio and workshop settings. Another institutional condition that probably served historically to promote the creation of our particular 'milieu', as you call it, was a substantial research grant from the Swedish Research Council from 2003–2007 which aimed at forming an academy for practice based research in architecture and design across Sweden.<sup>3</sup> Within that framework I ran a sub-programme with workshops, courses and exhibitions called Writing Architecture, which also drew international interest and participation. From 2011 onwards we have been a central part of yet another

large research grant from Formas supporting critical and experimental approaches to architectural research on a national level.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007, we formed FATALE out of a situation where all stars seemed to suddenly align for a feminist call to action (to be specific it was at a particular lunch, on the outdoor street-side terrace of *Divinos*, in late August or early September of that year). We have elaborated elsewhere on this moment of initiation.<sup>5</sup> Through FATALE, which formed at the same time as the academic subject Critical Studies in Architecture was established, we managed to create, together with our students (who came not only from the architecture programme but also came as continuing education students with diverse professional backgrounds, such as artists, planners, architects, journalists, conservation experts and more), a passionate, hopeful and forward-looking atmosphere. Ephemeral in their formations but bubbling with lots of humour, our courses, workshops, studios, conferences and salons have been mutually encouraging for participants – students, invited guests and colleagues at KTH.

And, for all the ephemerality that comes with what is situation-bound, where just as important as what is said, is how it is said, what gestures, glimpses and gazes do, how we sit and where there are material traces, what positions we take and how we play with them, we are also very proud of the more tangible materialisation that has come out of our efforts. Fresh from the press just now is the *Feminist Futures* volume edited by Meike Schalk, Thérèse Kristiansson and Ramia Mazé that was specifically developed from the architecture and gender course run under this theme in 2011.<sup>6</sup>

### **Queering institutions**

**FP:** In the Netherlands the defense of a PhD is highly orchestrated as a play with professors in black frocks and all, completely ludic as in Johan Huizinga's definition of the term. Hence, especially

Katarina Bonnevier's wonderful dissertation 'Behind Straight Curtains' was a mind-blowing exercise. To the Dutch, it embraced the ritual and theatrical aspects of the academic, just as it demonstrated the social ritual and playfulness of the salons (subject matter of her dissertation) and the way these salons acted as almost heterotopian places of refuge for voices that could hardly speak out in public space.

How do you view the re-appropriation of public space through your writing and research as performative acts? Is the salon, the seminar, the study still such a place of inbetweenness – perhaps in the way Henry Urbach has described the 'ante-closet', a space where to renegotiate the terms of institutional norms?

**KB:** Thank you for your appreciative words about my dissertation! It is always super fun to hear how my writings resonate with different readers and within different (historic, geographic and social) situations. I very much regard *Behind Straight Curtains* as a masquerading device which functions in several ways; a performance in writing, passing as a dissertation, trying to ride the performative force in order to generate new (definitions of) architecture and, most importantly, to create spaces for 'girls like us'. And we do have some black frocks spectacles in Sweden too. For instance, I could not bring myself to go to the official doctoral celebration because of the rigid patriarchal and heteronormative rules of behaviour.

What is important when dealing with these questions and situations is that they are inscribed in our own bodies, we always put ourselves at risk and we cannot pretend to be other than vulnerable. However, these are also the reasons why they can make a difference. The list of public situations you mention, as well as writing and research as performative acts, are still productive attitudes. But let's expand the list. For instance, the group MYCKET (of which I am a part) is researching *The*

*Club Scene* by staging full scale re-enactments of legendary queer/lesbian/feminist (night)clubs as significant spaces for embodied knowledge production and body politics. The closet metaphor is not my favourite, it feels like a heavy burden, rigid and small (even if the ‘ante-closet’ is not the closet it still refers to the closet). We need to wander a much wider landscape! Currently, I think the space Gloria Anzaldúa named in *La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness* (1982), ‘la tierra entre medio’ is the most accurate to describe the unstable, unpredictable, ambivalent and even frightening situation where terms are renegotiated.<sup>7</sup> Since institutions have such an ability to swallow or appropriate without really changing, we need to be always moving, turning around our preferences and twisting our motives.

### On writing and role play

**FP:** It is a well-established fact that with the advent of the novel, women in particular embraced the medium of writing, both as readers and as authors. And when in the nineteenth century historiography as a scholarly discipline was established, the historical novel was discredited, in effect excluding many female voices from institutional discourse.

How to understand the intersections of gender, role-play, fiction-writing and historiography? Where do you see yourself in the larger field – from the emergent ‘global’ histories to inquests into so-called tacit knowledge communities?

**KG:** Fiction releases our capacity for play, for imagining other positions, inhabiting other characters, being another in another world, testing and experimenting while at the same time ‘sitting still’. It allows us to let down our professional guards and as such it is not surprising that there is historically also a gender related story to the use of fiction. It has a clear power to shift established grounds, by messing with, undermining, undressing and simply humouring the serious ‘what we know’.

**KB:** I turn to bell hooks to understand how we can see the past as a resource for our commitment to the present – to create a world where everyone can belong. It is not about rescuing the past in order to rescue ourselves, rather it is about starting from here and not from an opposition. To be clearer, I can continue to exemplify with *The Club Scene* where we evoke spaces of the past and connect them to the ideals and yearnings of the present. They are not replicas and do not simply represent a nostalgia that looks back with longing and idealisation, rather the historic clubs are actualised through the fictive and factual experience of them. They are empowering, filling the embodied archives of the participants with the experience of resistance towards the ‘dominator culture’.<sup>8</sup> You are invited to change costumes and explore but you are not asked to play a role. But this materialised fiction-writing might just bring out another facet of our inconsequent selves. What is more, this obscure project also functions as a critique of the daylight normative discourse of architecture.

**KG:** Working from a situated knowledge perspective (following Haraway<sup>9</sup>), historical as well as current conditions remain open for critical revisits where decisive shifts in position and focus open up new situations and understandings.<sup>10</sup> In different ways, we all constantly play with fictional or semi-fictional modes of writing for this purpose. For example, Bonnevier entering into Nathalie Barney’s salon or Selma Lagerlöf’s *Mårbacka*, or Brady Burroughs into Aldo Rossi’s *Mozzo* row house, renovating, refashioning, queering what was already there before, but which reappears and changes through these new accounts.<sup>11</sup>

This is equally true when it comes to projections of future conditions. In January 2015 Critical Studies ran the two week ‘orientations’ course for all (120) architecture masters students at KTH. Here H  l  ne Frichot, with Katja Grillner and Bettina Schwalm, set up a future oriented scenario for the

Stockholm inner-city island of Södermalm, renaming it 'Söder Pops Island' and imagining this island to have declared its sovereignty from Sweden, to be governed by the political party the Feminist Initiative. The students were asked to work in different 'guilds' in service to the feminist government, mapping and proposing interventions to the island as subjected to its new conditions.<sup>12</sup> An exercise in thinking and acting on the city out of imaginative positions, where the members in the guilds themselves acted out an assigned character. The resulting exhibition showed a great variety of responses, from eerie accounts of dystopic totalitarian conditions (reminding us now of something out of *The Handmaid's Tale*) to playful (and hopeful) realisations of utopian dreams.

### Radical pedagogies

**FP:** From Judith Butler's performativity to role-play to enactment, your emphasis on situated or embodied knowledge-generation emerged and is embedded in the institutional milieu of the architecture school, as a highly imago- and logocentric place. How would you situate or distinguish your approach and its aims from an explicitly pedagogical angle? What do we have to learn or understand better?

**BB:** This reminds me of an interesting question I received during the public defence of my doctoral thesis 'Architectural Flirtations'<sup>13</sup> from my 'opponent,' Naomi Stead (then Acting Head of School at the University of Queensland), who asked about 'the cultural specificity of certain modes of performativity' in the work we do here in Stockholm. She made an observation/confession about the ambivalence, reservation, even at times discomfort, she felt (and recognised in her Australian colleagues) toward 'the kind of performativity that happens here.' She wondered why a group of Australian feminist/queer academics who were 'otherwise completely on the same page theoretically and politically' had trouble engaging with this kind of performativity, and admitted that 'there is no way that I would be able

to undertake the pedagogical activities you describe with my own students.' I must also mention that these statements were made with my 'opponent' (and the entire grading committee) donning brightly coloured feather boas I had provided for the event, in order to enact some of the queer campy practices I call *architectural flirtations* during this academic ritual. I would humbly suggest that this reticence toward these practices was at least partly overcome in that instance, as the boas were offered as a prop to everyone beforehand, rather than by force or surprise, in a gesture of what I call *pedagogical stewardship*. And besides, we all looked gorgeous in them!<sup>14</sup>

My answer was that although we do have the benefit of working within an environment that we have built up together, where we are not alone and where we not only support each other, but also learn from and challenge each other's efforts, I do believe that these practices are possible within other academic cultures. Although they take on different expressions, and sometimes even varying feminist positions, one thing we all have in common is the use of critical fiction (fictocriticism in Australia) and experimental writing as part of our pedagogical practices. Another element we share, inspired by Gavin Butt's ideas on 'scholarly flirtations', is the willingness to implicate ourselves and assume a more vulnerable position, inviting playfulness, humour, and the ability to take ourselves and our discipline a little less *seriously*.<sup>15</sup> In my own research, I describe this as learning to adopt a 'love ethic'.<sup>16</sup> By love ethic, I am referring to bell hooks' call to choose love and connection over alienation and separation, in order to resist 'cultures of domination'.<sup>17</sup> In terms of architectural pedagogy, a love ethic might mean choosing mutual exchange and learning (perhaps involving silly costumes or props) over the 'serious' critique and judgement involved in a conventional design crit. This vulnerable, 'weak', even queer, and most importantly situated position, as opposed to the 'strong', certain, habitual position

of the critic, disarms the situation and makes issues of gender, power, privilege, and ethics in architectural pedagogy visible, allowing for what I would suggest is a more conducive learning environment where necessary experimentation and failures are possible. (By the way, in the spirit of adopting a 'love ethic', I chose to attend the 'official doctoral ceremony' that Katarina mentions above; however, in order to reinterpret the 'black frocks' I wore a campy red boa there too!)

### **Trans-bodies**

**FP:** Assuming here you have a more Spinozist conception of the body, can you explain your understanding and approach to bodily materiality in relation to the performative and to language? Where would you situate yourself in the larger field, where do your differing/differencing approaches form alliances with recent approaches to spatial writing (Rendell) or new materialism (DeLanda, Braidotti), eco-feminism (Bennett) or agential realism (Barad)?

**HF:** A formula, a refrain, an oft-repeated 'little phrase' is useful here with respect to the Spinozist conception of a (trans-)body, and that is: we do not yet know what a body can do. Less than a deficit of knowledge this is a speculative gesture directed at the possible: what future encounters and collective bodies might we form, in the process of our perpetual transformations? It's important to remember that a trans-body avoids an either/or (either man or woman), but goes for the both/and (everything at once and I reserve the right to change my mind too, thank you).

Feminist thinkers and practitioners have long explored the leakiness of mindful-bodies, their permeable thresholds, and how the stuff and thinking that forms a body is not just my or your own sovereign, self-same secured body, but joining with, then separating out from, a body of water, a body of sound, a body politic, a technological body, an architectural body, and so forth. Sometimes forming

greater compositions, sometimes decomposing, and this depends on the encounters and relations with which a body forms an allegiance for the meantime. Because of this expansive sense of a body, its material and conceptual mutability, or its capacity to perform at the interchange of a material semiotics (entangling matter and meaning),<sup>18</sup> this also means that the environment as a body necessarily enters the performative scene. To paraphrase, a feminist materialist acknowledges the mangle of the human in the environment and the environment in the human.<sup>19</sup> Call this eco-feminism if you like. It is, to use yet another oft-cited Spinozist formula, a capacity to affect, and a sensitivity to being affected, which must be brought into our architectural and environmental constructions.

For us, if I can speak of 'us' as a collective body, an important construction is textual, and in this textual site-writing, spatial critical writing (we nod here to our friend Jane Rendell),<sup>20</sup> we are often multi-voiced, sometimes dialogical, frequently flirtatious.<sup>21</sup> If we find a concept-tool that we believe is useful, we put it to use, hence we are happy to create different transversal cross-sections (even irrational section-cuts) from Rendell to hooks to Braidotti to Ahmed to Butt to Bennett to Stengers to Haraway to Rawes to Barad to...

### **Trans-coding architectural knowledge**

**FP:** If the body is not a given, and architecture is a material practice of permanent transformation, reconstruction, and re-enactment, where would you locate the greater conceptual promises of architecture as transitional or transitive material configurations?

We would be interested in your position towards architectural classification systems, typology (or typological thinking), historical styles, or disciplinary divides, especially in relation to such familiar tropes as the home and the social.

**HF:** There are some who have expressed exhaustion in what they perceive to be an excess of process driven approaches to architectural design. They say, enough with process, enough with perpetual transformations, back to the object, let us return to the masterpiece.<sup>22</sup> We hold firm in our dedication to the compositions and inevitable decompositions of architecture, we hold firm in these sometimes fast, sometimes glacial transformations. That is to say, we are carried along by other concerns and matters of care (Puig de la Bella Casa), ones that are situated, and acknowledge banal and everyday vicissitudes. All the same, some 'category work' is necessary lest we entirely lose our heads, that is to say, we need to be critically alert to how categories are constructed so that we can better challenge them.<sup>23</sup>

We must strategically position ourselves, and do so in response to the problems that confront us.<sup>24</sup> A taxonomical chart, as even a cursory investigation reveals, will never tame the wild profusion of things and sexes. But a category, a type, a signed concept, can be pragmatically useful from time to time. The abstractions of these organisational strategies allow us to stake a claim, when one is needed, pitch a tent and sink our heels in where socio-spatial oppressions become evident.

Nodding to the Swedish father of taxonomy Linnaeus, our colleague Sara Vall has had success in creating a critical taxonomical chart composed of 28 rooms to enable us to see the controversial site of Slussen from a different frame of reference, a critical spatial and poetic one. Slussen, an urban node between Gamla Stan and Södermalm in Stockholm, currently undertaking massive renovation, is shown as not just a knotted traffic infrastructure, but a collection of 28 discrete spaces where lives are being carried out for the time being. Or were, until the 28 rooms were demolished one by one, thereby dispensing with the makeshift taxonomical chart

and returning the infrastructural node to something of a troubling *tabula rasa*.<sup>25</sup>

### **Spatial writing / drawing together**

**FP:** Finally, we'd like to hear more about the truly 'troubling' questions. Donna Haraway's latest work for example advocates 'staying with the trouble', so that we can learn to 'become with' our material environments. What troubles you most about where architecture seems to be heading to nowadays? What sort of transformation is desirable? How to trouble architecture?

**KG:** Today, in 2017, it seems difficult to even begin to respond to a question about where *architecture* seems to be heading, the acute matter of concern, rather, is perhaps on the world, on current threats to democracy and civil society. Where are the basic humanitarian values that we may have taken for granted heading? How can architecture be significant in all this? What is it to be an architect, specifically, today? One great challenge is perhaps simply to stay in focus, somehow, to circle around and hover above precise spatial and material conditions, to instigate change in a specific context, be architecturally skilful in that, and yet critically understand what difference it makes in a bigger picture. We can teach architecture students to zoom in and out, and to shift positions, both within themselves, and to understand the complexity of the site and situation in which they might find themselves working. This is important.

**HF:** In many ways we are yet to learn even the fundamental lessons, and it is astonishing how the purported 'core of architecture' maintains its conservative status quo. The incredible work of the Australian group of architectural researchers Parlour ([archiparlour.org](http://archiparlour.org)), demonstrates how: the pay gap (between men and women); low pay (for almost everyone); the unequal representation of women in leadership positions in the profession

and the academy; unreasonable working hours and expectations; the disproportionate celebration of the idols and icons of architecture, still dominate the scene. What Parlour demonstrates is that collective action is possible and that tactical forms of feminist protest backed by well-researched statistics can make a change.<sup>26</sup> They have already been instrumental in introducing new policy frameworks into the AIA (Australian Institute of Architects) and raising consciousness about the challenges faced by women and minority groups in architecture through their website and their events. I've also noticed recently the open letter that the Architecture Affinity Group of TU Delft Feminists addressed to the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture at TU Delft on 8 March 2017, for international women's day.<sup>27</sup> I observed with a leaden heart the paltry and non-committal response they received from the Dean. It reminded me of the kind of lip service that led Sara Ahmed to resign her position at Goldsmiths once she recognised the yawning gap between what the administrators were saying and actual change on the ground. These are the kinds of trouble we need to stay with, not being afraid of being 'women who make a fuss'.<sup>28</sup>

When we framed the call for papers, and then curated the recent AHRA (Architectural Humanities Research Association) conference, *Architecture and Feminisms: Ecologies, Economies, Technologies*,<sup>29</sup> we paid special heed to where we located urgent contemporary problems. We argued that these pertain to our precarious natural and constructed environments, the destructive dominance of economic rationalism, and our poor critical take on technologies, also a domain where we still see insufficient participation from women. To stay with the trouble of each of these domains of concern there are in fact many inspirations we can draw on, which often requires extending our citational practices (not always referring to the usual suspects), drawing on other disciplines where this is strategic,

and reinventing our own concept-tools to tackle the problems that we face, rejuvenating what Isabelle Stengers calls our ecology of practices.<sup>30</sup>

**BB:** Katja and H el ene have already raised urgent broader concerns, so I'd like to shift the focus for a moment and look inward. I'm interested in the kind of 'trouble' that many of us are embedded in as a condition of our discipline and profession. We've mentioned bell hooks a few times now, but I think her fantastic mantra bears repeating. How can we 'stay with the trouble' in identifying and shifting the ways that our research, teaching and practice reinforces or reproduces the values instilled by what hooks calls 'a system of imperialist, white supremacist, [heterosexist], capitalist, patriarchy'?<sup>31</sup> Hooks's words are a clear and tangible way to remind ourselves of the intersections of 'trouble' we encounter in architecture and the need to be critical about the critical projects we undertake. As one of my favourite feminist killjoys suggests, laying claim to a feminist/queer/critical position can lead to the dangerous assumption that one is immune to the possibility of exercising oppression on someone else. Sara Ahmed writes: 'the self-perception of freedom from norms can quickly translate into a freedom to exploit others'.<sup>32</sup> I think (and hope) that even if sometimes sluggish, architecture is moving towards a better understanding of these intersections, with efforts such as this themed issue; however, there remain difficult moments of 'double-ness' that we as critical architectural scholars/teachers/practitioners face every day. In what ways do we support the system mentioned above, consciously or unconsciously? Can we slow down and acknowledge these moments of difficulty, and use that vulnerability in order to bring about change?

In all of the following killjoy moments, I draw on my own familiar dilemmas, but use the pronoun 'we.' When we cite favourite feminist voices of colour such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, or Sara

Ahmed in our academic work, and then still agree to serve on the organising committee of an international conference composed solely of other middle aged, middle class, white feminist academics, because it will raise important issues (but it also won't hurt towards tenure or that promotion to professor). When we deliver a stinging critique on the neoliberal effects on education or capitalist forces on urban development, and then eagerly volunteer free intellectual labour to contribute/edit/peer review for that high-ranking journal or prestigious publisher with exorbitant prices and minimal access, because we have an obligation and privilege to use our voice (but it will also advance the rankings of our institutions and our own careers). When we engage with students in design studio and encourage work that challenges gender norms, power relations and the status quo, knowing that they will most likely be judged in relation to the prevailing dominant image of what architecture is and who it's for, what architects do and who can become an architect, by someone with authority over them, because we want to change that (but it also provides necessary 'good examples' that help justify institutional inaction to prevent 'real' change and possibly supplements our own research). Or when we sit in design juries ourselves, adhering to the way it's always been done; same set-up, same criteria, same discussions, same values, because we may be able to inflect a new tone or exchange (but hey, we also have bills to pay, so we need this gig!) When we profess solidarity with our female counterparts and allegiance to ideas of equity in the profession, and then jump at the invitation to bask in the limelight of straight, white, male 'starchitects' (or starchademics) at an important event, exhibition, or conference, because we need access to power in order to affect power (and also, networks matter).

How do we constructively and critically rethink these dilemmas? I'm not suggesting that there are any clear or easy choices. In some instances, I have chosen not to participate at all, but I don't

know whether *that* is the answer either. Only that we must 'stay with the trouble', echoing Hélène's words – dare to be feminist/queer/critical killjoys, and hold ourselves (collectively) accountable. When negotiating the very difficult and sometimes conflicting demands of our discipline and profession, I often look to the queer icon and internationally known drag queen artist RuPaul who says: 'When the going gets tough, the tough reinvent.'

### Notes

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  32. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 171–172.

### **Biographies**

Katarina Bonnevier, Brady Burroughs, H el ene Frichot, and Katja Grillner each have different positions, institutional affiliations and professional collaborations; however, they are all trained as architects and doctors of philosophy, and share an interest in critical theory combined with experimental writing practices. Likewise, they share political, ethical and social concerns, where feminist and queer theory intersect with the discipline of architecture. These diverge from, but are in no way limited to, their connections to the School of Architecture at KTH, The Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, where each has participated in architectural research and education within Critical Studies.