After Effects

Theories and Methodologies in Architectural Research

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Critical Inhabitation: Interruption and Performative Criticality

Sepideh Karami

Come closer to the common mystery. Attend to the ordinary. . . . It is the wisdom that sees the ordinary with amazement. (Lao Tzu, *Tao-Te-Ching*, ca. 400 BC)

Looking Away

In Lahijan, rains, fig trees and evacuation are enemies of the houses. When a house is evacuated, rains and fig trees take root in its walls; and the house gradually falls. In 1978,[1] the west side of the house was still standing. It rained, fig trees took root and it collapsed. Since when has the revolution been on the house's mind? When did the revolution start in our house? Was it the house that like a womb developed the revolutionary ideals in its inhabitants' minds or was it the revolutionary ideals that devoured the house? (Mirehsan 2010; Author's translation)

Rain is falling. Passengers queue in spirals across the airport. Her face is wet with tears. Outside, it's dark and the car's spotlight sheds light on layers of unreadable graffiti. A fading light lights the religious murals on the Tekyeh's walls.[2] Streets are empty, and a lonely sweeper moves in his orange uniform. The house opens its door to a narrow alley, a labyrinthine house, with fig trees and narcissuses in its backyard. The house contains old photographs, deep-shadowed rooms, rooms full of stacks of books, toys, stained-glass windows, low wooden doors, a long veranda. Within a stone's throw is the mosque, where Ashura rites take place yearly during Muharram. The house is abandoned.

I am watching *A House That Pours*, a documentary by Ahmad Mirehsan on the 1979 Iranian Revolution. To narrate such a historical event, Mirehsan applies a method other than the representational one. The story is narrated not through the overt representation of ubiquitous signs and images of revolutions but by means of their absence and by looking at the minor elements that are not usually part of grand narrations. Instead of situating his film in the streets, he makes the idea of revolution unfold in his childhood house—a house that is left alone.

Addressing critical writing about performances as compared to the art-historical object, Peggy Phelan renders the performative potential of writing as a crucial approach (Butt 2005). This "performative" modality of criticism "does not reproduce the object or event it addresses but instead enacts it through the very practice of writing" (ibid.: 10). This performative potential can be seen in relation to historical events. Writing critically about revolution as a unique spatiotemporal event needs such enactment, too, and this is what is present in Mirehsan's narrative method. That method is not *about* the revolution but in dialogue *with* it. As Jane Rendell says in her essay "Setting Out," "Rather than write *about* the work, I am interested in how the critic constructs his or her writing in relation *to* and in dialogue *with* the work" (Rendell 2011: 35; emphasis added).

This article was mainly written in my kitchen, and the process of writing and working in the kitchen is documented in the images included in this chapter, including the image on the previous page

1. The Iranian Revolution began in 1978–1979.

2. A space found mainly in Iranian architecture and used mainly by Shias for mourning during Muharram.

In *A House That Pours*, the event of the 1979 revolution is intensified amid the architecture of a house and its garden. The house is old, a paragon of traditional Iranian architecture. On entering each room, one is confronted with several routes through the house. Mirehsan compares the revolution to a labyrinth. The garden, the labyrinthine spaces, the multiple doors opening and closing one after another, the continuity of movement through the space, the niches, the mysterious corners unfolding before the light that inches in—all are elements that begin to perform, to enact the spatial act of revolution. He places these elements "in dialogue with" the revolution and makes them perform as the ground for a revolutionary act; the elements that we usually take for granted, but which hold the potential to prepare the ground for dissent. He shifts the ground of revolt from the street to the house and thereby invites us to see the house, a private space, as a performing ground where the most radical elements of revolution are growing, making us wonder, What is it that makes us revolutionary?

This method of looking away from the hackneyed elements of an event and constructing a ground for the minor elements to perform can be best explained by Irit Rogoff's definition of the same term: *looking away*, as a mode of performative critical reading of, or engaging with, the "objects of our supposed study." In the move from "criticism to critique to criticality," Rogoff suggests that performative criticality is a critical act that, "while building on critique," operates "from an uncertain ground" but wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis.

> . . . The diverting of attention from that which is meant to compel it, i.e. the actual work on display, can at times free up a recognition that other manifestations are taking place that are often difficult to read, and which may be as significant as the designated objects on display. (Rogoff 2005: 119)

This "*diverting of attention from that which is meant to compel it*" is useful not only in the critical reading of an art or cultural object but can be applied as a method of acting in the world, including creating cultural, political, and social situations, producing new grounds for action. Not only does it help us to discover new, not-yet-exhausted niches of acting or performing, but it becomes the score of a performance. Rogoff continues,

> In fact, it may well be in the act of looking away from the objects of our supposed study, in the shifting modalities of the attention we pay them, that we have a potential for a rearticulation of the relations between makers, objects, and audiences. Can looking away be understood not necessarily as an act of resistance to, but rather as an alternative form of, taking part in culture? (ibid.: 119)

Hence, by the methods of looking away the house is inhabited differently and is turned into a different kind of performing ground. This altered inhabitation works by way of two aspects. First, in the real life of the house, where dissidents transform the domestic space into a space of dissent, practicing the revolution in every corner of the house and as their everyday lives, turning dissidence into the art of living. But inhabitation is also expressed in the documentary and in the way the story unfolds in the house as the ground of performative narration, turning the house into the stage of reperforming an already finished historical event. As a result, through this different inhabitation, a deteriorated event has interrupted the deteriorating life of the house. Within this interruption, within this encounter, the routes toward deterioration are changed. Thereby the house is transformed from a finished object into a new womb to give birth to the idea of revolution. At the same time, the historical event of revolution is reperformed through the house.

How can this form of performative, critical inhabitation be defined and practiced in architecture? To approach and investigate this question, I apply the method of interruption as a method of making space. Interruption is here a performative critical practice of architecture, a tactic that can act from within as well as upon an architectural object to transform it from a finished object into a performing ground. To develop interruption in relation to performative criticality, I situate it in the discussion of critical architecture to observe its ins and outs in relation to different critical strategies.

From "Strategies of Engagement" to "Tactics of Interruption"

> Always, criticism manifests itself as a clash between the established, dominant status quo of culture and society and divergent possibilities, deviant latencies and the excluded other as a search for enlightenment, alternatives and changes. (Fischer 2012: 58).

In her discussion of political strategies in art, Chantal Mouffe discusses the possibility of "critically engaging" (Mouffe 2015: 67) with institutions as an alternative to Exodus; that is, the total withdrawal from existing power structures. Exodus strategies, Mouffe explains, are in favor of ignoring existing dominant powers and constructing alternative social forms outside the state power network (ibid.: 66). She suggests that hegemonic practices that install certain orders in any context and fix the meaning of social institutions are always temporal; there is always the possibility of developing counterhegemonic practices. These practices, however, dismantle the existing orders by means of installing new ones. Drawing upon Antonio Gramsci, Mouffe declares this "a war of position . . . whose aim is to profoundly transform those institutions by critically engaging with them" (ibid.: 67).

Architecture as an institution and as a material culture can be read as a hegemonic practice because it consolidates certain power relations by means of its material realization in the world. Yet as Ole W. Fischer states, its slowness in realization makes it resistant to change (Fischer 2012). Constructing counterhegemonic practices in architecture becomes a paradoxical yet appealing practice to pull off. When, in the shadows of "the

very presence of architecture" (Leach 2004: 116), a prisoner crawls out of its walls, a rebel writes a revolutionary slogan on its facade, and a dissident undertakes mischievous acts in its corners, there is more to architecture as a cultural material than those characteristics that suggest its complicity with power. Where Neil Leach warns that architecture "always install[s] a new status quo" (ibid.: 116) by its very presence, and hence undermines its capacity to be subversive, I argue that this capacity should be defined in relation to characteristics that are inherent to architecture, that give material identity to rebellious actions. Something in architecture reveals, paradoxically, what it tries to conceal: a stubborn resistance to change that aestheticizes actions acting upon it. You hammer it, it shouts; you bombard it, it destroys spectacularly.

To develop counterhegemonic practices in architecture, I argue for a "tactics of interruption" (Karami 2016) alongside Mouffe's "strategies of engagement." These are practices that produce temporal critical alternatives and thereby disrupt existing orders and fixed meanings. These tactics can be developed as *minor* forms of practices.[3] "Minor"—as in a "minor literature," as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*—is not "specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 18). In contemplating how this minor language could be realized, they state: "How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope" (ibid. 2003: 19). What is embedded in the concept of minor, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is its subversive potential. Translating the minor into the practice of architecture, Jennifer Bloomer introduces a minor architecture as what "operates in the interstices" of the mainstream. She characterizes such practice not as "opposed" to the major architecture but "upon/within/among" them, and she suggests minor as "An other writing upon the body of architecture. . . .Architecture becomes the ground, or stone, on which its [MAPPING] is inscribed—on which its processes bleed. Kafka" (Bloomer 1993: 36).

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3. Michel de Certeau distinguishes tactics from strategies by appointing the latter to a "proper place" and the former to "time." He explains, "I call a 'tactic,.' . . a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The 'proper' is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.' Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities.' The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. This is achieved in the propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements . . .; the intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form, however, not of a discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is 'seized'" (de Certeau 1984: xix).

Continuing Bloomer's concept of minor architecture, Jill Stoner also defines it as those practices that "operate both upon architecture's grammatical construction of (virtual) power and within its physical, material form" (Stoner 2012: 2). Following Bloomer and Stoner, I argue that tactics of interruption situate a minor language within the established language. This activity can be realized by methods of looking away. Another way of putting this is to invite the play of "negativities," a term used by Maros Krivy (2010: 849), to disrupt the established language of architecture, to act upon architecture. Krivy, in investigating the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Richard Smithson, and Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher, states, "These artists are interested in the *part* of architecture and space that *has no part* in the existing *distribution of sensible*. These works do not simply oppose architecture with "what it is not" but this opposition is presented in order to challenge the very meaning and content of architecture" (ibid.: 849; emphasis added).

What Krivy calls "negativities" in architecture, Simon O'Sullivan, in his "Notes Towards Minor Practice," forwards as "non-artistic material" in developing a minor artistic practice. He discusses it as one way of deterritorialization or stammering of the "global language of contemporary art production" (O'Sullivan 2005: n.p.). They both argue for the application of parts that have no part in cultural material practices (not to mention, the yet-to-come or unknown parts).

In this way, tactics of interruption, through creating temporal critical alternatives, give material identity to the act of criticality by becoming performative. This could be an approach that allows us to remain critical in architecture. In the very impossibility of critical architecture, as many scholars and practitioners claim, the endeavor is still to explore its incarnation, not in postcritical stances—where the ghost of criticality still wanders around in relation to the term 'postcritical'—but in performative bodies. Many scholars and practitioners—for example, Rem Koolhaas, Michael Speaks, Robert Somol, and Sarah Whiting—have, each in their own way, forwarded architectural practices that aim to deviate from the critical. Arguing for the impossibility of criticality in architecture, they propose different models. Somol and Whiting, for instance, offer the idea of the "projective" (Baird 2004). While critical architecture is accused of distancing itself from the "real" work of architecture (i.e., buildings), becoming saturated instead in theory and merely questioning the status quo rather than suggesting pragmatic alternatives, postcritical stances have turned their back on the challenge of questioning the status quo in favor of "projecting" the new with the slogan of "solving not problematizing" (Fischer 2012: 59). Projective practices risk the pitfall of becoming complicit with a dominant power hierarchy without questioning its relations. If critical architecture, as Fischer states, has itself become a "dominant institution, rather than producing unexpected interpretation" and "alternative concepts for action" (ibid.: 59), projective architecture has not contributed to the project of change either and has mainly busied itself with changing the appearance of dominant power. Given the present status of the world, the oscillating trends between the critical and the postcritical (or the projective) suggests the inefficiency of both approaches. However,

thinking beyond the clear-cut division between these trends might open a new ground for constructing alternatives while still performing critically.[4]

Interruption: Constructing a Performing Ground

To approach performative criticality in architecture, I apply interruption as a mode of architectural practice. The notion of criticality is already embedded in the term *interruption*, but not necessarily in *intervention*, which is mostly used in relation to the material practices of architecture. Reading through what Michel de Certeau defines as a tactic, interruption can be understood as a time-based practice that takes advantage of opportunities to change the order of things in an established setup. In the field of literature, especially in critical fiction, this form of action is described not as a new language but as a language that opens a space for itself in the dominant, or major language. Interruption as a temporal tactic does not "simply reflect a world" but "has the power to make a world" (Loxley 2007: 2).

What is constructed in interrupting architecture is in fact a performing ground laid out by means of performative criticality. The performing ground takes place not by adding but by transforming and decolonizing a situation via processes of deterritorialization. Olivier Choiniere's Project Blanc, understood not as an architectural project but as a performance, is an example of constructing such alternative grounds. In this project, which he describes as "theatrical hacking," he criticizes the performance of Molière's *The School of Wives* by undertaking his own simultaneous performance. In his performative criticality, a group composed of members of an audience is given secret instructions and an MP3 player with a recording of Choiniere's monologue, which offers a political critique of the show while it is being performed. The audience, sitting in the balcony of the theater and spectating the main performance is simultaneously attending another performance run by Choiniere. With this act, Choiniere articulates another relation between the spectator and the main performance. By creating a performance within a performance, he produces a space or occupies a space that does not immediately disturb the background event but articulates alternative relations within the existing assemblage of the ongoing performance. The relation is performatively critical.

In the field of architecture and spatial practices, one can see that Choiniere's project is not that far from the kinds of spatial practices architecture is able to explore. The project involves a place, or "taking place in a space, of making space in place" (Nilsson 2015: 157). This example demonstrates how inhabiting a moment can be turned into a critical inhabitation by means of a tactics of interruption. Performativity raises criticality from being a tool of analysis to being a way of inhabiting a problem. Performativity in this sense refers to enacting through the very practice of inhabiting.

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4. Lara Schrijver distinguishes between *postcritical* and *projective*: "I will hold primarily to the term 'projective,' as there is something distinct about the projective that appears to suggest a more productive orientation towards architecture and its discourse. Where the 'post-critical' largely appears to dismiss the previous paradigm of the so-called 'critical,' the projective attempts to incorporate criticality and re-inscribe it directly within the disciplinary boundaries of architecture" (Schrijver 2011: 353).

Critical Inhabitation

An occupant, Tim Ingold states, is different from an inhabitant. The occupant has prior knowledge of the politics of space, of its borders, limits, and boundaries. As Terry Meade points out, this is achieved "by viewing (or drawing) space from above without inhabiting it" (Meade 2013: 11). An inhabitant, on the other hand, achieves knowledge over the space, its limits, boundaries, borders, and possibilities, over the course of time, by being in the place and interacting with its material and immaterial orders and relations. He writes of the inhabitant as "the one who participates from within in the very process of the world's continual coming into being" (Ingold 2007: [illegible]). Out of the economy of occupation and inhabitation, there is also the spatial existence of a dissident, who neither occupies nor merely inhabits; instead, she critically inhabits a space.

Critical inhabitation can be best explained by the presence of a dissident in a space. A dissident, as Ines Weizman (20[illegible]) defines it, is different from an activist. An activist's context of action is in relation to a public context, and her mode of action is direct confrontation. The dissident's context of action is everywhere, but mainly takes place in spaces that are not defined for protesting against the oppressive power (i.e., squares, streets, and public spaces). Her main context of action is in the private spaces of domestic life; for instance, in the kitchen (ibid.), the living room, and in the dark niches of the house. Here architecture protects the dissident. At the same time, the dissident's critical inhabitation of architecture undermines the borders between inside and outside and between private and public.

Critical inhabitation in this way expands architecture from a finished project to a political, continuous practice of making space, by questioning not only the borders and boundaries of space but what it tries to look away from.

Afterword: Critical Inhabitation, a Critique of Dysfunctional Institutions

Plot: Dysfunctional institutions violate both themselves and their collateral institutions. Their dysfunction dismantles their own established spaces but also produces spaces for encountering different and unfamiliar activities, events, and emotions. When in 2015, during ongoing turbulence at the Umeå School of Architecture, the doctoral students (including me) were forced out of their work space, they had no choice but to set up a work space at home, in the sphere of domesticity. Living in a small studio apartment, I turned the kitchen into a working space where unfamiliar activities were combined, overlapped, or from time to time disturbed one another. Inspired by kitchens as a context for a dissident's actions, the following photo essay experiments with the critical inhabitation of a kitchen; it is an ongoing investigation addressing the promise of dissident acts within existing institutions, examining the possibilities as well as the limits of dissidence within academia.[5] This article was mainly written in my kitchen, and the process of writing and working in the kitchen is documented in the following pictures.

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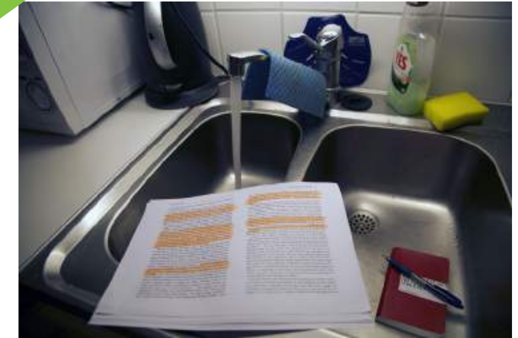
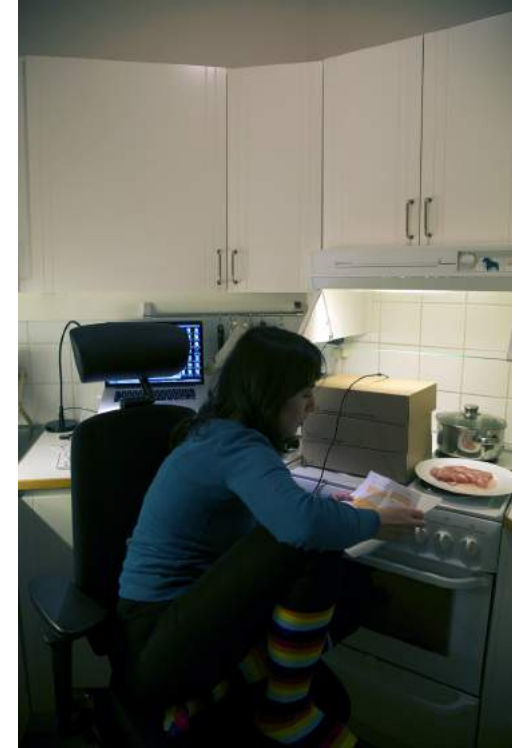
5. For more, see Karami 2016, where a fictional and fictitious publication is used as one "tactic of interruption."





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