

Lilian Chee reads *Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film*, by Anna Ulrikke Andersen, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

Under the Influence: Attuning architectural histories

Let us consider the precarity of architectural history. In particular, when does architectural history find itself on a precipice? When does it begin to wobble? This mini excursion – ontological and epistemological in nature – is my response to Anna Ulrikke Andersen’s project *Following Norberg Schulz*. The night I finished reading Anna’s book which ends with these five words – ‘landscapes, buildings, bodies, temporalities and ideas’ – many questions swirled in my mind. Questions about the researcher’s life, her indebtedness towards, and the burden of, her subject on her back (here I refer to Anna’s evocation of Derrida’s *pancarte* – the burden of carrying the knowledge of those who come before us), her relationship with architectural history (is it one of reverence or deference?), her motivations to create and imagine through film, the unsettling of the book’s format (which is rendered now incomplete unless one shuttles between it and the vimeo URLs), and where the researcher positions herself professionally (in film or in architectural history?) – or let’s throw in a more contentious term here – where is Anna’s allegiance in the academy?

I did not sleep until 4am that night.

In her essay ‘Precarity’s Forms,’ anthropologist Kathleen Stewart argues that precarity incites new forms of making, acting, thinking, and expressing so that ‘we might ask what it means to meet the world not as representation, interpretation, or raw material for exploitation, but as a *nearing*.’<sup>1</sup> Precarity references a still unfolding phenomena which cannot fit within representations and conclusions we already know. Calling for acute attunement – a seeing and sensing of gestures, rhythms, patterns, glitches, sediments and desires – what we encounter is not something already finished and ready for evaluation, but instead something ‘coming into existence.’<sup>2</sup> Stewart calls this modality of thought ‘worlding’ – a mode of writing and theorizing invested in the potential of emergent happenings in the ordinary.

Stewart’s essay covers four scales of precarity – the first about place viewed as bodily, affective, tactile, and visceral, and how place inevitably envelops and worlds us; the second about human frailty at home particularly that of her own mother after her father’s death and the physical unworlding this loss unfurls in the older woman’s domestic spaces; the third about the American road, its journeys, rituals, rules, stopover places, and roadside architecture as the invisible connection threading through the humdrum as well as the eventful; and the fourth and last, a portrait of Barton Falls, a river destination in Austin, Texas where people take idyllic breaks from life over holidays and weekends. In these affective portraits, Stewart divulges details which read out of place particularly in what she and the late Lauren Berlant call ‘the academic ranch.’<sup>3</sup> The essay sits somewhere between the immediacy of fieldwork notes, diaristic entries, and academic analysis. This coming-near-something-unfolding accounts for seemingly detours: ‘unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just add up but take on a life of their own as problems for thought.’<sup>4</sup>

The writing watches others while it watches the writer.

How do we attune ourselves to our research subjects? Is this attunement aspirational? How do our subjects' qualities, aesthetics, rhythms, and chaos overlap with ours? How does 'worlding' happen here? Anna has demonstrated that to follow a fellow Norwegian architect of another generation, is to find similarities, to seek coincidences, to shadow, to re-enact, to track, to go along (often in faith), to act under the influence of, to act under the shadow of, to carry the weight of this person, and in so doing, to put her own writing self at risk. To follow is also to admire, to support, to understand. The book follows the subject in 10 episodes. It has qualities of a detective novel where clues are allowed to travel their distance, to expend their conclusions, and to spin more questions about the missing protagonist. As Anna writes, Schulz was and continues to be viewed with some scepticism in architecture. His phenomenological perspectives, which often read like vague opinions, still tend to divide a room. The itinerary for following this figure is made by Anna who literally travels through several European cities as well as visiting public and private spaces and buildings in Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, transiting through France, Denmark, and Sweden. The clues, like those emanating from good detective novels, range from the directly relevant to the loosely conjectural.

A conceptual frame is given by the window, a device that appears as a metaphor for looking into something concealed. This is Anna's methodological intervention which stitches all the essays together. There are also many literal windows. In Chapter 1, Norberg Schulz's father allegedly fell to his death through a window, in Chapter 5, the architect seals up a large window deferring the view outside for the sake of the library of books within, and of course, the cover photo of the book shows the architect by a train window during one of his many return journeys from Italy to Norway, epitomizing the Eureka moment when he understood for himself the concept of *genius loci*. The window, as Anna reminds us, is *both* for looking out and for peering in. Rather than a surface, it has thickness, it is a space, a threshold that separates and connects. She writes of the poet Maria Rainer Rilke's poem on windows which allow points of views that are never static and distant but conversely 'tactile, fickle, and in constant flux.'<sup>5</sup>

Following this, I would say the 'window' connecting the architectural history of Norberg Schulz and the researcher's experiences in this project is *the essay film*. The films in this book are creative insights, albeit temporary moments of entry and fugitive occupation. They forge a kind of attunement between Anna/the researcher and the slips of evidence about her research subject. The essay films are literal windows too, a viewing device, a vestibule to understand history, which Anna emphasizes more than once following historian Keith Jenkins, is not about the past, but rather a subjective construction from a present perspective, and in Anna's case, an insistently embodied projection as well. It is not just Norberg Schulz's history but also the researcher's which is being constructed and reconstructed in the 10 chapters. Several questions arise from the assumed critical closeness between the researcher and her subject: At what point does criticality break down in the disciplinary and researcher/subject reconfiguration? Does the creative space of the essay film ever threaten to overwhelm the architectural historian's research? Or should we anticipate and allow this to unfold? Is the researcher at risk of over-identifying with her subject? Or should this be allowed to unfold too?

One of two distinctive features of this project is the writer's presence. Anna writes in the first person, not once or twice but countless times. She is behind the camera and she is behind the texts.

Her critical closeness to Norberg Schulz can be both disarming and discomfoting. In *Risking Who One Is*, the literary critic and writer Susan Rubin Suleiman offers a critical definition about writing on a contemporary's work through a register she calls 'mediated autobiography, where the exploration of the writer's self... takes place not directly but through the mediation of writing about another.'<sup>6</sup> For Rubin Suleiman, a 'contemporary' refers to someone whose work and life is compelling for three reasons – that the writer is able to identify with her subject on shared grounds through how the subject evokes 'self-recognition, historical awareness, and collective action' in the writer.<sup>7</sup> In this triad, an engagement with a contemporary subject necessitates confronting a present, past, and future in which we, as researchers and writers are invested. A contemporaneous subject can be exciting because it piques our self-interest. But because it *matters* to us – we are drawn into our subject by a passion to know, rather than a quest for objective knowledge – it is risky. It exposes the critic's self, leading her into 'muddy waters,' 'temptation and error – or into beatitude and bliss.'<sup>8</sup>

This impetus to intervene, just like when Anna steps into the frame of her camera, is key to the propositional structure of creative practice. Still the intervention, the proposition, is never free from the subject. It is compelled to return again and again to converse with subject and scene that haunts: There is the recurring image of Norberg Schulz with a newspaper in his right hand, standing by the window on a speeding train, remembering the snowy Norwegian landscape, featured 3 times in the book.

Journalist and writer Joan Didion tells us:

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. ... *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?* When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically about images that shimmer around the edges.... Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. ... The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. ... It tells you. You don't tell it.<sup>9</sup>

Anna must have seen this image shimmer around its edges.

The second distinction the book makes is not just representation of an argument but the attention to seeing. The project concerns itself, in my view, with the act of attunement; its primary contribution to scholarship is not just an in-depth excursion into the life and work of an architectural theorist – Norberg Schulz – but a demonstration about how this historian – Anna Ulrikke Andersen – sees. Anna gives the reader insights into her vision. She exposes the scaffolds of herself looking. She gives us details not just of what and where but how historical material is encountered. This view includes the historian's anxieties about what to do with what she finds, or does not find, yet fervently hopes for.

'The essay film', the film theorist Timothy Corrigan argues, 'is a way of seeing that subject as much as it is about that subject'.<sup>10</sup> The essay film in its very format of self-expression, allows the open-ended process of thinking, and of the possible conceptualization of new worlds through such thinking, that is to say, it is a vestibule (remember the window) where thinking encounters a public

sphere, that is, the historian's fluid thoughts are emplaced with her audience. These essay films challenge the assumed objectivity of the documentary mode with their experimental structure. They aim to say something about the filmmaker (here again, Anna) in her encounter with a subject, but at the same time to allow the audience to encounter this subject for themselves, so that this audience may also partake in the shimmer of her subject. In short, the essay film makes thinking affective, it makes thinking visceral. This is not to say that Anna's essay films tell us how to feel. Far from it, viewing the films, we are often placed in a difficult and divided position, what Corrigan calls 'the interstices' of the work's expression – gaps, detours, and intervals – which communicate both what it knows and what it speculates or strives to know.<sup>11</sup>

And so, let's return to where I started: the precarity of architectural history. In my reading of *Following Norberg Schulz*, while the elements of architectural history may all be present – the man himself, his books, his ideas and influences, his buildings, exhibitions and drawings – they are also not arranged as we might expect in a typical historical narrative. Here, the epistemological narrative is interrupted, frequently hijacked by what the discipline would call 'peripherals' – the mysterious death of a father, the enigma of windows, the many what ifs – things which shimmer.

The films were made as evidence of a return to the scenes of history, as documents of the historian's experience. They say to Anna and they say to us: 'This is what I/she saw and what I/she encountered.'

In those moments of thinking through these encounters, in contemplating the evidence of her interventions at the scenes of history, the historian – Anna Ulrikke Andersen – considers herself looking and inhabiting her evidence; and in so doing she unravels the distant objectivity and mastery often demanded of architectural history.

Lilian Chee, National University of Singapore.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Stewart, 'Precarity's Forms', *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2012): 524.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Stewart, 'Atmospheric Attunements', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (2011): 446.

<sup>3</sup> Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Stewart, 'Weak Theory in an Unfinished World', *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1 (2008): 72.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Ulrikke Andersen, *Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 131.

<sup>6</sup> Susan R. Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Didion, 'Why I Write', in *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* (London: Harper Collins, 2022), 50–51.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 88.