

## RESEARCH ESSAY

# Critical Spatial Practice as *Parrhesia*

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## Critical Spatial Practice

I understand my own method of criticism to be a form of practice, one that is critical and spatial (Rendell 2006: 193).

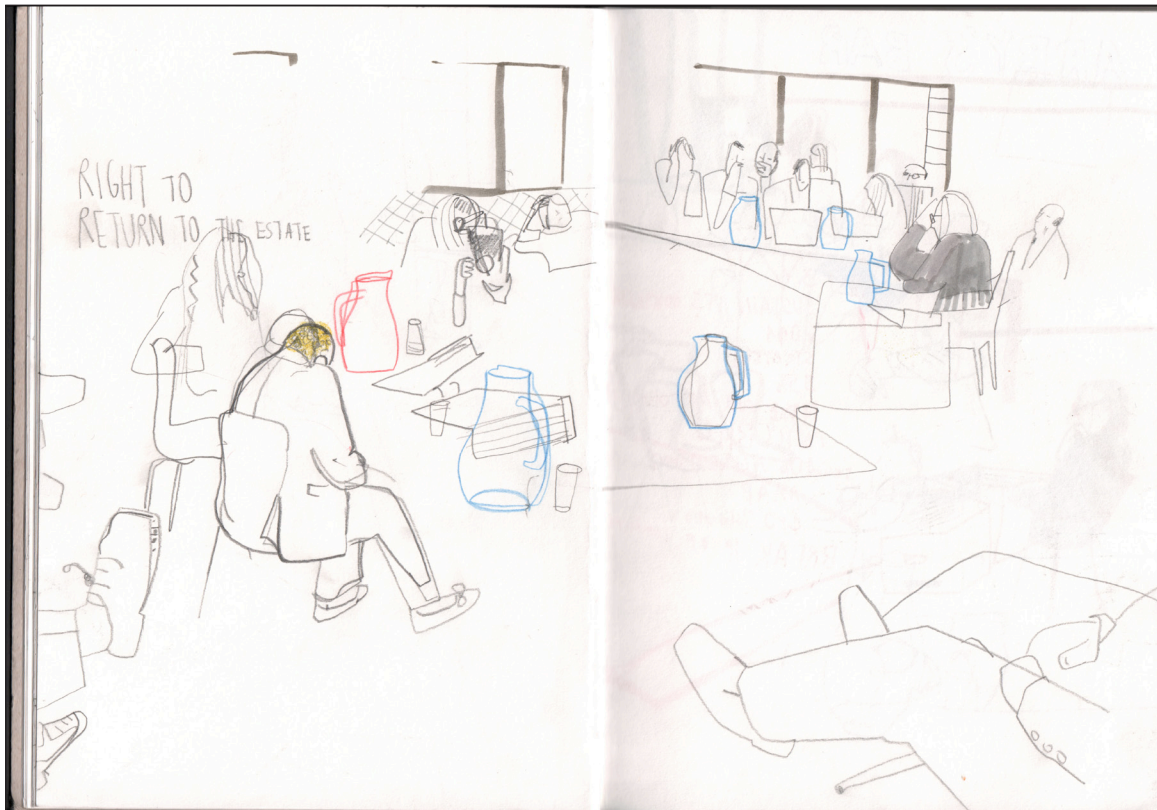
In *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* I introduced the term 'critical spatial practice' to define modes of self-reflective artistic and architectural practice which seek to question and to transform the social conditions of the sites into which they intervene (Rendell 2003; Rendell 2006: 1–2, 4, 6, 9, 12, 66 and 191). Through the process of writing the book I came to understand that my own position between art, architecture and critical theory was constantly changing and influenced the interpretative accounts I was able to offer. I concluded *Art and Architecture* by arguing that the writing of criticism is itself a form of situated practice, one that is critical and spatial.

I came to call this practice 'site-writing' (Rendell 2005; Rendell 2010). This essay is one such 'site-writing' which situates my own current academic work as a form of 'critical spatial practice' more generally, and *parrhesia*, more specifically (Foucault 1983). As I started to write these sites I found it useful to consider the distinction Hannah Arendt draws between labour, work and action in *The Human Condition*, in which, labour corresponds to the biological life of humans and animals, work to the artificial processes of artefact fabrication; and where action – and its connection to speech – is the central political activity (Arendt 1958). I realized that the actions of speech that I had taken in various sites – at home and at work – were interventions into existing institutional structures, performed to critique and activate them, and could be described as forms of 'critical spatial practice'.

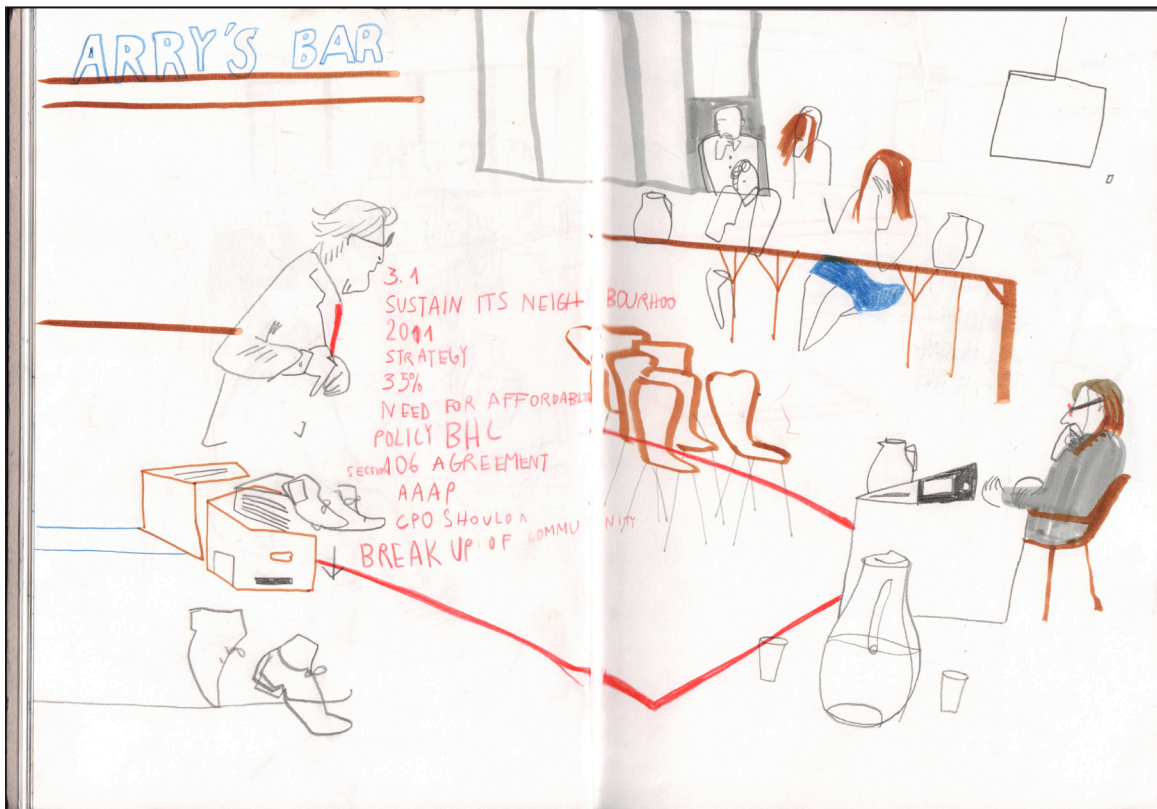
## Speech Action I: Making Home Work

From my desk in my flat on the eighteenth floor of a tower block in south London, I wrote a sole-authored academic book on transitional spaces in psychoanalysis and architecture, specifically social housing. From the window I could see a history of London housing design lying at my feet: from the pointed end of the Shard at London Bridge, where – soaring skyward – penthouses contained private swimming pools and cinemas, to the 'affordable' new flats being built along the northern edge of Burgess Park, in place of the social housing provided by the 'slab' blocks of the Aylesbury estate, some of which had already been demolished, while others lay under threat.

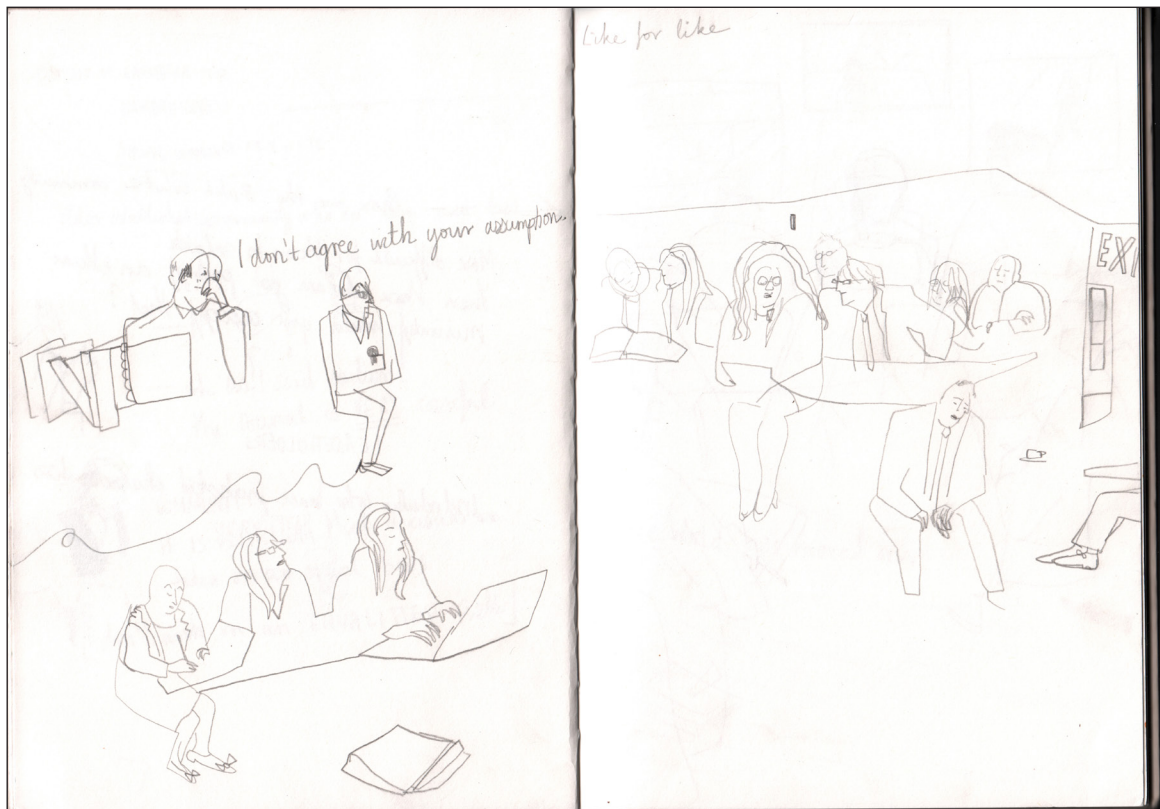
As I drew the book to a close, I discovered that my home was in Southwark Council's 'estate renewal zone' (35% Campaign 2014a). Property consultants Savills had been advising the Council of the need to 'unearth the potential' of public land, including 'brownfield sites', a term which includes fully occupied housing estates (Savills 2014). According to Savills and others, post-war 'point' and 'slab' blocks are not dense enough, and should be replaced by mansion blocks situated on re-introduced street layouts (Savills 2016). Although new research shows refurbishment has less social and environmental cost than demolition (UCL Urban Lab et al 2014), the advantage of new build is that existing residents can be moved out, and in return, following viability studies, the developers can make their non-negotiable profit margin while providing a small percentage of 'affordable housing' (GOV.UK 2012). Through this process of 'regeneration' tenants have been displaced from central London into other boroughs (Lees et al 2014), and leaseholders ejected from the city entirely, due to the low rates of compensation paid when the councils issue compulsory purchase orders (35% Campaign 2014b). I was so angered by the Council's actions, that I decided to use my professional skills to get involved in the fight for the Aylesbury, and to turn my fear of the uncertainties around my London home into my academic work – making home work.



**Figure 1:** The Public Inquiry into the Aylesbury Compulsory Purchase Order, 'Arry's Bar, Millwall football ground, south-east London, 13–4 October 2015. Illustrations by Judit Ferencz.



**Figure 2:** The Public Inquiry into the Aylesbury Compulsory Purchase Order, 'Arry's Bar, Millwall football ground, south-east London, 13–4 October 2015. Illustrations by Judit Ferencz.



**Figure 3:** The Public Inquiry into the Aylesbury Compulsory Purchase Order, 'Arry's Bar, Millwall football ground, south-east London, 13–4 October 2015. Illustrations by Judit Ferencz.

One site of a speech action, where home was transformed into work, was 'Arry's Bar at Millwall Football ground in south-east London. This was the venue for The Public Inquiry into the Aylesbury Compulsory Purchase Order, held from 28 April to 1 May 2015, continued on 12 May, and then adjourned until 13–4 October 2015, so that the objectors, including The Aylesbury Leaseholders Action Group, of which I was a member, could gain legal representation. The text that follows consists of material taken from my Academic Expert Witness Statement (35% Campaign 2015), which was submitted to Government Inspector Leslie Coffey on 23 April 2015, as part of the Public Inquiry:

'I, Jane Rendell, of The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL), 140 Hampstead Road, London, NW1 2BX, say as follows:

[...]

#### Overall Argument

I question Southwark Council's use of Compulsory Purchase Orders to acquire leaseholder properties on the 'Order Land'. In my view, there is not a 'compelling case in the public interest' (London Borough of Southwark 2014: 4, 1.11), to 'justify interfering with the human rights of those with an interest in the land affected' (The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004: 7, 17), by the use of CPOs which would go against Article 1 of the *Protocol of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (European Court of Human Rights 1952, 31).

The Government Circular 06/2004, *Compulsory Purchase and the Crichel Down Rules*, notes that CPOs can only be taken when 'there is clear evidence that the public benefit will outweigh the private loss' (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004: 7, 19). The London Borough of Southwark state that:

"[...] a local authority must not exercise its compulsory purchase power . . . unless it thinks that the development, re-development or improvement is likely to contribute to the achievement of any one of more of the following objects: (a) The promotion or improvement of the economic

well-being of their area; (b) The promotion or improvement of the social well-being of their area; (c) The promotion or improvement of the environmental well-being of their area (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2004: 8–9, 5.2)."

In my view, the regeneration programme of the Aylesbury is not promoting/improving the wellbeing of the area. If we recognize the existing residents as part of the 'area', then removing people from their homes against their will certainly does not improve the social well-being of the area, while demolishing well-designed housing does not contribute to the environmental wellbeing of the area.

The following seven aspects of Southwark's regeneration scheme do not promote or improve the wellbeing of the area, are not 'in the public interest', and thus do not justify the CPO of leaseholder properties on the 'Order Land':

- (1) Choosing to demolish rather than refurbish [ . . . ]
- (2) Reducing the number of affordable units [ . . . ]
- (3) Displacing mixed communities [ . . . ]
- (4) Organising the new housing according to economic status [ . . . ]
- (5) Ignoring the democratic decision-making processes [ . . . ]
- (6) Prioritizing private profit over leaseholder wellbeing [ . . . ]
- (7) Redaction of key information concerning 'viability' [ . . . ] (35% Campaign 2015).'

### ***Parrhesia***

In Foucault's lectures on the practice of *parrhesia* in the Greek culture of the fourth and fifth centuries BC, he explores the evolution of the term with respect to rhetoric, politics, and philosophy, and investigates the link between *parrhesia* and concepts of frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty (Foucault: n.p.). Foucault summarises his thinking as follows:

' . . . *parrhesia* is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).' (Foucault: n.p.).

Later in his lectures, Foucault turned to examine the function of *parrhesia* in terms of the crisis of democratic institutions, and to discuss how *parrhesia* occurs as an activity in human relations, with respect to oneself and the care of the self, as well as in relation to others, specifically through three kinds of relation: individual-personal, community and public life (Foucault: n.p.).

### **Speech Action II: Taking Work Home**

At the same time as I was making home work, I was involved in other speech actions at the site of my employment, which involved critiquing, not Southwark Council, the freeholder of my home, but my employer, University College London (UCL), for whom I have laboured, worked and acted (in Arendtian terms) since 1993 and from whom I receive a salary. In January 2013, I had questioned UCL's decision to accept \$10 million of funding from the Anglo-Australian multinational mining and petroleum company, BHP Billiton, to create an International Energy Policy Institute in Adelaide, and the Institute for Sustainable Resources in London at the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, of which I was then Vice Dean of Research. This process was so stressful that I took it home, thinking about it constantly, even at home, at night, when trying to sleep.

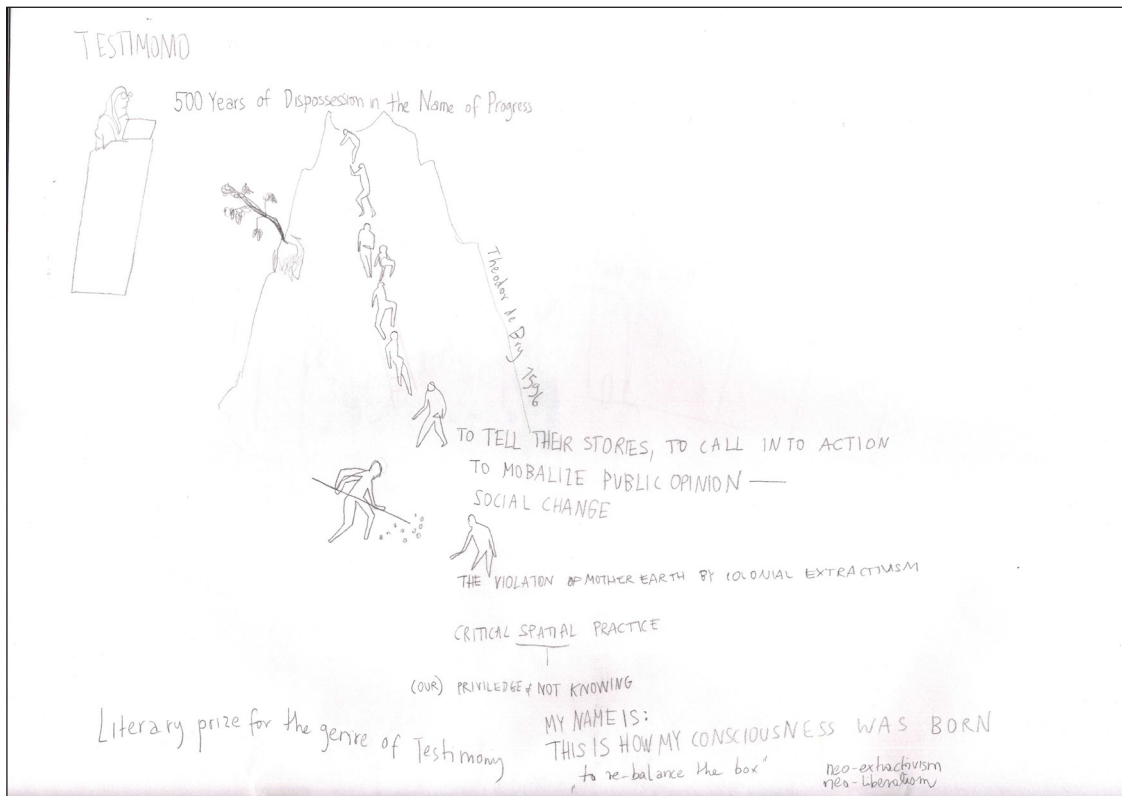
'The fear that woke my stomach, reaches my head. Wide-awake in a still-dark bedroom I realize that when morning comes I will have to outline the research I've conducted for UCL's risk register. As Vice Dean of Research I have been asked to 'own' the risk of research expansion. I have considered UCL's reputation as global researcher leader, and its academic reputation based on independence and integrity, as paramount. I will suggest that one of the risks associated with research expansion, comes from accepting financial gifts from corporations, particularly where there are disparities between the practices of those corporations and UCL's core principles and procedures. I will focus on UCL's decision to accept funding from the charitable arm of BHP Billiton in June 2011 to set up



**Figure 4:** ‘Speech Extractions: Witness, Testimony and Evidence in response to the Mining Industry’, a conference co-hosted by Jane Rendell, Bartlett School of Architecture; Diana Salazar, Development Planning Unit; and Richard Solly, London Mining Network; at the Bartlett, UCL, London, 20–1 October 2016. Illustrations by Judit Ferencz.



**Figure 5:** ‘Speech Extractions: Witness, Testimony and Evidence in response to the Mining Industry’, a conference co-hosted by Jane Rendell, Bartlett School of Architecture; Diana Salazar, Development Planning Unit; and Richard Solly, London Mining Network; at the Bartlett, UCL, London, 20–1 October 2016. Illustrations by Judit Ferencz.



**Figure 6:** 'Speech Extractions: Witness, Testimony and Evidence in response to the Mining Industry', a conference co-hosted by Jane Rendell, Bartlett School of Architecture; Diana Salazar, Development Planning Unit; and Richard Solly, London Mining Network; at the Bartlett, UCL, London, 20–1 October 2016. Illustrations by Judit Ferencz.

an Institute of Sustainable Resources (ISR) at UCL and position this inside the Bartlett in September 2012 (BHP Billiton 2011; UCL Enterprise 2011). I will argue that in so doing UCL is taking a risk with its reputation for independent research into sustainability, allowing BHP Billiton to buy legitimacy for the continued mining of fossil fuels and to potentially influence not only policy on sustainability, but also the definition of this contested term. I have judged the risk of potential damage to reputation to be significant enough to purchase a report by RepRisk on BHP Billiton (RepRisk 2013). This collection of media articles provides evidence of how far BHP Billiton, and so any company associated with them, is exposed to reputational risk. Along with other companies in the mining sector, BHP Billiton is categorised in this report at the maximum risk level on environment principles, and exceeds other companies in reaching the highest level of risk in the areas of anti-corruption, labour and human rights.

Since government funding to cover teaching costs has been all but removed in the UK, increasing efforts are being made to attract a new income stream – corporate sponsorship. But there has been little institutional acknowledgement of the shifts in culture and governance occurring in universities as a result of the reduction of state funding and the introduction of loans for UK undergraduate students. Yet although UCL is not a public university, but a chartered corporation (McGettigan 2013: 126–8), it is still proud of its radical tradition, that unlike Oxford and Cambridge it was not founded as a religious entity, and was the first British university to accept women students on the same basis as men and award them degrees. Being radical has recently become key to our brand and a communications briefing requests that we speak in a voice that is radical and open.

Before dawn, almost every night now, I am jolted awake, surprised and disorientated for a moment; and then I remember, and panic rears up through me. Could critiquing the institution I work for lose me my job? Has UCL done its homework, and even if it has, will the right governance structures and due diligence procedures really be able to protect the independence of academic research? UCL has argued that we must engage with businesses in order to change them. But I still find it hard to grasp the stated logic, that, on the one hand, when the funding is at arm's length,

the giver of the gift – in this case a charitable donation – cannot influence the research that is funded by the gift it has given, but that, on the other hand, the receiver of the gift can influence the activities of the giver.

Back in January I asked to see three documents: the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) due diligence procedures undertaken when deciding whether to accept the funds; the structures and procedures in place to protect academic independence and integrity; and the performance indicators to monitor how this corporation has been changed by its engagement with UCL. Six months later I was still waiting for them to be sent to me.

On 1 July 2013 I formally 'stepped down' from my role as Vice Dean of Research for the Bartlett in a spoken presentation at a meeting of the Research Advisory Group (RAG) of which I was then chair. Following my 'stepping-down', I met various senior managers at UCL to discuss my decision. They showed support for the work I had been doing on reputational risk and expressed an interest in involving me in developing UCL's ethical procedures and structures. In an act of 'stepping up', I put forward several proposals for action, including drafting a rationale for divestment in fossil fuel, hosting a public debate on the funding of universities by fossil fuel corporations, and writing an academic article on competing narratives in the contested arena of sustainability (Rendell forthcoming).'

## Instituent Critique

In its contemporary form *parrhesia* has been considered a mode of 'instituent practice' (Raunig 2009):

'What is needed here and now is *parrhesia* as a double strategy: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation, and as self-questioning. What is needed, therefore, are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions, and the institution, their own-being institution. 'Instituent practices' that conjoin the advantages of both 'generations' of institutional critique, thus exercising both forms of *parrhesia*, will impel a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism.' (Raunig 2009: 10–11.)

I am still writing, and by now you will be reading, traces of actions – social, institutional and self-critical – that I have practiced through speech – critically and spatially – across sites of my academic work. Taken together – from speaking out to stepping down (and then up) – from making home work to taking work home – these words comprise that academic article that I promised UCL in July 2013.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Information

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