



In Orbit of Dead Man Friend

Alex Schweder

Autobiography is not so much about revealing the facts of one's life as it is a construction of one's self through the telling of experiences. Architectural theorist Jane Rendell, drawing on the insights of Susan Rubin Suleiman, puts forward this understanding of autobiography in her *Site-Writing* (2010: 50). And in Rendell's writing I find permission to think about architecture, which is also an act of construction, as a mode of autobiography through its requirements for cleaning and decoration, through its hosting of life events, and through its structuring of human relationships. An amalgam of these actions, buildings stage the performance of our life stories, not only expressing the subjectivities of their occupants but also shaping them. Can the making of one's own home be conceptualized as autobiographical in this sense? The domestic drama of constructing and performing one's self?

Conceived of in this way, as an autobiographical cycle, architecture builds subjects who then author new buildings, which in the context of this chapter can be understood as dramaturgical acts. 'Performance architecture' (Gratza 2013: 141) is a term I coined a decade ago to encapsulate this idea and put forward an understanding of architecture as giving cues for how occupants are to behave and offering itself as a prop for inhabitants to form and perform their identities (see Butler 1990). This term emerged during my first collaboration with artist Ward Shelley called *Flatland* (2007), where we built a two-foot-wide, four-storey-tall building to occupy for three weeks with four other people (Schweder 2012: 105–106; 112–113). The gap between who we thought we would be upon entering *Flatland* and who we were upon leaving compelled Shelley and I to make new works to spatialize and share these new selves. Living in each work to discover who we become in the situation has become our methodology





for discovering ideas that lead to new works. Our collaborations, now seven works old, have all repeated this process of designing a building to produce a relationship between us, living in it without leaving for a predetermined time, experiencing the ways we are changing, reflecting upon those changes and the work's meaning both among ourselves and in real-time conversations with those who visit us, and then conceiving of a new inhabitational performance that we think might communicate our discoveries to an audience. In a way, viewing our performances is like looking at stars; they offer glimpses into the past by communicating who we were at the end of our last performance.

Jealousy and dementia can both be characterized by their circularity, each producing endless loops – the former because one cannot forget and the latter because one cannot remember. Sitting in a living room loaned to me by friends who were out of town, I regrouped from my wife's decision to be with a younger man. Ward tried to direct my attention towards more productive things: a new work maybe? He'd been there for my first divorce as well, but it was easier the first time. After all, we were Rome Prize winners back then, and the American Academy in Rome's august architecture was somehow a fortress for my confidence. It was as though the walls were made of sponge that had soaked in a century's worth of pride from accomplished artists and architects, available to be drained and drunk by living within them. But the second time around, moving from place to place, week to week, no house was inhabited long enough to steep me with dignity.

I cannot remember who first thought of a circular house to function like a hamster wheel, Ward or myself, but that never really matters between us; we don't compete like that. The circle resonated that day. Some works happen slowly – over years – picked up every so often and turned around to be seen from a different angle. *In Orbit* happened like that: a flash in the pan of ideas we were collecting turned just right that day. A hunch became a project.

Both just sketches of what and who we would become, *In Orbit* and I both needed sites to call home and build ourselves. 'Hi Mom, it's Alex. Things didn't go according to plan.' And with that she welcomed me back to my childhood home to spin my jealousy in the safety of her care. While I thought I was there to rehearse having a home, I found that I was in fact there to rehearse loving. What better leading lady than a mother? When she kept repeating her lines, though, her dementia announced itself through this circling, asking the same questions again and again. After a few months of our doubled but opposite orbits, her revolving queries became rotating fictions that she was convinced were real. A



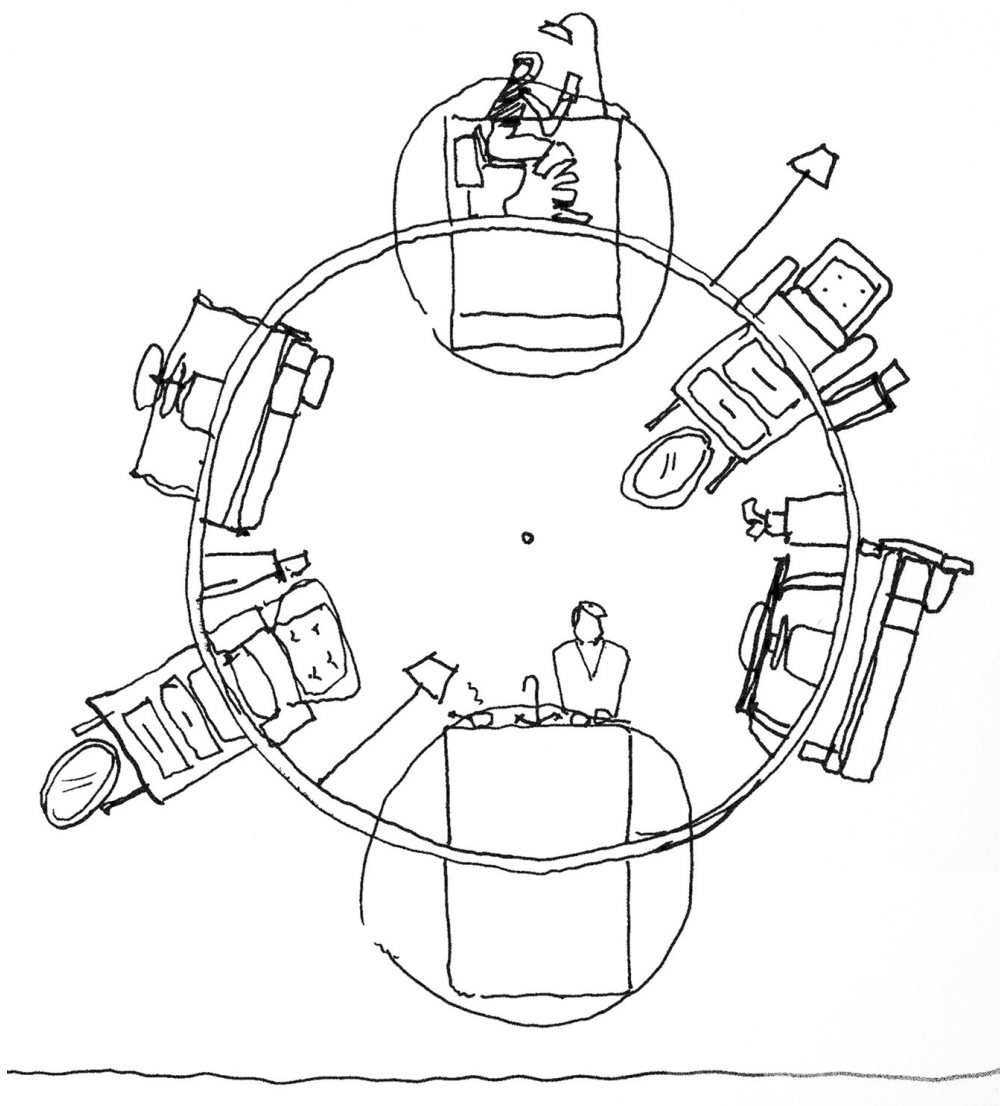


Figure 11.1 Sketch of *In Orbit*. Image courtesy of Alex Schweder.

murderous cadre from the neighbourhood would come at eleven each night to ‘take us out’. Through patience and endless hours addressing voices only she could hear, the importance of being loving as much as being loved gradually stilled my jealousy.

With our twinned fates, *In Orbit* and I found homes of our own two years later through Ward. He paid the deposit for a private flat and arranged for his gallery, Pierogi, to publicly present *In Orbit* in a decommissioned power plant that was used for commerce-free installations. The small disc-shaped medicine that would come to calm my mother’s mind had not yet been prescribed and we brought her to work with us. She sat in Ward’s chair before it was attached to the



wheel and watched us, enthralled yet unable to imagine what we were making. It was finally finished, her borrowed chair now spinning right side up then upside down, and she needed a new place to sit, first on a train, and then in the safety of a friend's home.

Two years prior, in the borrowed living room, we thought we were making a building about cooperation. At the time, this idea offered me a toehold in a self I wanted to hang on to, a married self that acted as a team doing everything together. When we moved into our spinning wheel home, though, we experienced the situation quite differently. Ward moved onto the outside of the wheel in deference to my crippling fear of heights. In turn I took care of him by carefully keeping the wheel at rest, only moving when he was ready.

One visitor observed: 'You two are doing everything at the same time, but you are never together. Doesn't that get lonely?'

Maybe this was what happened to my marriage.

Another person – very young – asked: 'Does it make you feel funny that everyone is watching you?'

Were he a little older I might have replied: 'I feel this exposed all the time.'

We did not expect the kind of attention we received. It was a cold February and our Brooklyn venue was difficult to reach, but the media coverage of two artists living on a hamster wheel seemed to capture the public's imagination as a metaphor for daily life's constant motion that brings us nowhere.

'For me, this work is a metaphor for the futility of the daily grind', a particularly burdened-looking person asked.

'Well, we try not to impose our thoughts about what this means on you', Ward gently replied. 'We're just happy you are here.'

Mom called: 'It is so inspiring, honey, seeing you and Ward on the news walking for peace.'

I thought she meant world peace at the time, but as I write I like to think she meant a more personal kind. 'Thanks Mom, I love you.'

Like the hundreds of other audience members that we spoke with, Mom had her own interpretation of what we were up to. With them Ward and I would discuss the work, our experiences and what we thought it meant. Different answers were given depending on when the conversation occurred. You could say we were lying, but in fact we were recounting our thoughts in real time as we were reconciling our intentions with the lived emotions. *In Orbit's* meaning was made collaboratively, with our visitors, in this way.

'Hey Alex', Ward called down to me in the quiet of the gallery's afterhours. 'You know I feel kind of guilty up here.'





Figure 11.2 Ward Shelley, *In Orbit*. Photo by Double Cyclops and courtesy of Alex Schweder.

‘What do you mean, Ward?’

‘Every time I have to go to the bathroom, I need to interrupt what you are doing. It’s like being the passenger with a small bladder on a long road trip, always asking the driver to pull over. It challenges my identity as someone who is self-reliant. I feel dependent on you.’

‘Interrupt me as often as you want, I could never live on top and am just so thankful that you can.’

‘You know I think this piece is more about care taking than cooperation. It feels similar to what taking care of my dad was like.’

‘Yeah, or taking care of my mom.’

With this, the tacit experience of caretaking that was such a part of my life at the time felt like it could become sharable. It wasn’t fully embodied in this piece, but we started to talk about making a new piece that might do this. A person walking into the exhibition space of this new work would immediately read a relationship of caretaking through the building and our occupation of it, just as *In Orbit* visualized cooperation.

Our ten days’ living *In Orbit* ended publicly with cheers and a closing party, the two of us climbing off the wheel and out of our brightly coloured suits. As soon as I was back in street clothes, I had to rush and fetch my mom from the train our family friends had put her on. Over ten days my needs, actions and thoughts



had been sensed and responded to by Ward through the rotating building. I was jarred by sadness at the indifference of the crowds to my rush. Without seeing me, shouldn't they have felt me coming through the subtle somatic cues of the sidewalk? I could feel them; why couldn't they feel me? I had not accounted for the mass of people that I needed to push through and was five minutes late. The loneliness that abated while performing *In Orbit* returned among this indifferent crowd. It all went wrong. Mom got confused and lost, and I had to enlist the police to find her in the station. Both in tears, we returned to our apartment – once again safe in mutual care.

Living in our work is how Ward and I make new work, to discover the difference between intention and experience. Our discoveries of performing *In Orbit* led us to thinking about a new building that requires caretaking between its occupants in order to live in it. At the time of writing, this work, provisionally titled *Dead Man Friend*, is still an idea. When the time comes, we will make a building where one artist is in bed for the duration of the performance. The other artist will occupy a full apartment and can come and go as he pleases. The freely moving artist will need to feed, bathe and toilet the bedridden one. Architecturally, the large living space will be designed such that when the artist gets out of bed, the rooms of the freely moving artist's apartment will come crashing down, suggesting that the one in bed is also taking care of the one who moves freely. *Dead Man Friend* points in this way to the doubled nature of care taking – the need to love and to be loved.

Our works set up a proposition for who we are to become. There is a relationship in mind that we want the building to shape us into. As Ward and I live in our works, however, that intended self is in contrast to the selves we bring to the project, shaped by other things that are happening in our lives, like learning to love again. It is in the ways that we don't fit the proscribed relationship that become most interesting; illuminating the misalignments of who we are and who we would like to be is an outcome of the architectural artworks we make. We would not necessarily see ourselves so clearly or tell our stories in the same way without this contrast of intention and experience, and it is here that I find architecture and autobiography to be in their most productive tension.

