

A room *in* one's own: performing inner spaces, autotheoretical and beyond

1. Welcome home

In April 2021, my doctoral advisory committee was reading a wordy, complete draft of my thesis. I was at home - this home. It was the later stages of covid lockdowns (remember those?), and the isolation had been helpful in getting the work done. Helpful, and even relevant. My research on collapsing figures involved a loose mix of autotheory, performative writing, art of all periods, interiority, and interiors. Spending time fretting indoors was, for better or worse, a perfect plan.

As I prepared my defence presentation, it occurred to me to make a digital model of the home that had witnessed and encased all my work. In this virtual space, or digital twin, as they are sometimes called, I was going to demonstrate how interior and interiority permeate each other. Following the autotheoretical impulse that had guided my writing (more on this later), I thought the digital twin was going to be proof of how my personal life influenced my research, and how my research left a mark in my personal life.

Spoiler alert, it turned out to be harder than expected. I built a couple of versions, showed them to a bunch of people, and never presented any of it in an official manner.

Nonetheless, it is this project that failed to even launch that I will talk to you about today. I will tell you about some of the influences that went into the idea of it, how it was meant to work, and why it ultimately did not. I will go through a quick succession of short sections, rather than unravel one big topic. The intent in doing so is to give you different points of access to the project. Although I will march on rather swiftly, I hope to be able to return more leisurely to anything that tickles your fancy later, during our conversation.

Welcome home - come on in.

2. Atlases, assemblages, and constellations

My research was a methodological bastardisation of Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*. Fascinated by Warburg's visual arguments, I, too, did a bunch of atlases. These used existing images of the art and phenomena in my research. But, in a way, my own writing was an atlas, too. As I mentioned earlier, I was writing autotheory. As the name suggests, autotheory proposes that the division between oneself and theory is a false dichotomy. That the two pollute each other. That embodiment, affect, and experience affect how we read and understand the world. That the theories on the reality we inhabit sneak into how we live.

Unlike typical academic and theoretical texts, autotheoretical prose is often written in small bursts, which result in a kaleidoscopic assemblage. This literary device reminded me of Warburg's atlas - the interval acting as a divider and connector. On the page, my writing would attempt to ignite into meaning via encounters with citations (a very autotheoretical thing to do), other texts of my own, and the images they referred to.

I needed you to know this, because the project I am telling you about was, in a way, an attempt to push this experimentation even further, introducing spatiality, literal virtuality, and an increased sense of agency for a potential reader.

3. Inner spaces

So, that was the rationale as far as form and technology are concerned. There were, of course, also a myriad of literary and artistic influences.

The first is Spanish mystic Saint Teresa's inner castle. In 1577, Saint Teresa described interiority as a sequence of seven rooms, or seven levels. In each of these, the soul is further and further enlightened in Christian doctrine, and so it comes closer and closer to god. If you've ever heard of Teresa, you probably know about the erotic descriptions of her encounters with the divine. That's the kind of thing that happens in the innermost chamber,

the most profound expression and space of the self (which is a very contemporary way to put this). The illustration here comes from a 1677 edition by a friar named Juan de Roxas Auxa. Teresa's intimate, intangible space becomes a sort of progressive sequence. The question of how to represent interiority is an old one.

Formally, it reminds me of this. Another prominent figure in my research, or rather, in my life, is the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois, who was extraordinarily well-versed in psychoanalytic theory, worked consistently on the relation between female experience and domestic space, creating a series of characters she called *femme-maisons*. She further spatialised personal trauma in her cell series. These architectural installations are a feat. They are simultaneously public and private; monumental and detailed; present and past; empty and full; implicit and explicit, internal and external, locked and accessible. They are truly as much space as self.

Another work that was in my mind, but never appeared explicitly in my writing, was a website / visual essay called *Dreams of your life*. *Dreams of your Life* was a companion piece to a documentary called *Dreams of a Life*. It told the story of a British young woman called Joyce Vincent. Joyce died in her apartment, and her body was only found three years after, television still on. Her death and loneliness were unimaginable, and shocking - no one sought her out in all that time. No one checked on her. Telling her story without sensationalising it is a delicate, sensitive matter. This website, designed by a now disbanded collective called Hide & Seek, commissioned photographer Lottie Davies to create a virtual, interior view, and writer A.L. Kennedy to compose an interactive text. Combined, they position the online visitor into the interior quality of Joyce's place and life. The website is no longer available (the stills are from a surviving promo video), but I am still haunted by it, by the way a relatively simple proposal generated a complete immersion.

4. The virtual twin

You now have an idea of what was in my mind in 2021, when I decided to create a digital twin of my domestic space as a case for excerpts of my dissertation.

I downloaded Matterport onto my phone. Matterport is an app used in real estate to give potential buyers virtual tours of properties. Museums use it for virtual visits, too. It works by collating hundreds of photos taken from different perspectives to give the illusion of a 3d space. Hyper-aware of the limitations of physicality due to the Corona experience, it became urgent to translate site-specificity into virtuality as a way of sharing.

The navigation was exciting, of course, as it seemed a way to create a hyper detailed but immaterial art installation. But something that made the software appealing for this purpose is that it allows little pop ups with different media. Normally, these would be for extra information on the specs of a home, for example, but I thought this feature could be turned into a tool to hold the excerpts, and possibly expand them beyond text on a page.

So, I painstakingly took pictures turning on myself from the main door, up to the living floor, up to the sleeping floor. My dog chased after me, as he always does, and you can spot him every now and then, like a ghost, flickering in and out of view, often awaiting atop a staircase, gone by the time you've climbed it. I then peppered the virtual twin with selected bits and pieces - scans of open books, voice notes, texts - so that a potential visitor could encounter them as they went through my shelves, my desk, or my clothes.

5. Space-image

Architecture historian Charles Rice's *The Emergence of the Interior* (2007) main claim is that interiors, as we think of them now, are a 19th century conceptualisation. Naturally, people had been inside rooms before. But Rice marks this period as the time when interiors became something in and of themselves, other than a default practicality (it must be noted, there is a

counter argument for 17th century Dutch Golden Age paintings to have done this, but I won't get into that right now). .

Post-industrialisation, the new bourgeois class can now afford to furnish their places, and do so with new-found abundance. At the same time, the popularisation of photography leads to all these new luxuries to be immortalised, flattening all them into images of realised ideals. And this is what Rice finds key: it is precisely the overlapping emergence of the interior as a space, and the interior as an image that generates the combined interior (space *and* image) as we think of it now.

Although in the spring of 2021, when I proceeded to produce a virtual version of my apartment, I had not read Rice yet, in hindsight, it seems suggestive how technology like Matterport not only updates but deepens this definition of an interior. Because of digital interactivity, the space becomes an image, but the image becomes space, too.

6. Dollhouses (I): space as narrative

When you capture a matterport space, you have different possible visualisations of these rooms. You've already seen the rather demented gif from earlier, and these in-room scenes. My favourite, though, is the so-called dollhouse, which turns the whole set of rooms into an architectural volume without façades, affording the viewer impossible perspectives. Indeed, like dollhouses (making us, depending on the perspective we choose, both players and dolls).

Unlike architectural models, designed to showcase certain qualities of the building; typical dollhouses admit to the space being a stage for a set of active characters and a myriad of props. Take, for instance, the lush Dutch dollhouses of the 17th century. Big as wardrobes, incredibly expensive, these were typically given to well-off brides, rather than little girls. So valuable, in fact, that there are painted portraits of these, twisting the space-image thought

in a different direction. These houses, which would be status-symbols at the time, are now aspirational reminders of social relations and roles, a globalised abundance of material goods, traditional crafts, and of course, interior architecture.

Me, I had one cherished Playmobil Victorian-style dollhouse that even made a flash, anecdotal appearance in my PhD (another form of spatial portrait, if you will). I also had a couple of Polly Pocket compacts, which fascinated me in their minuscule ingenuity. One of them, the 1992 Starlight Castle model even had a secret room, accessible, like in an 80s movie, by pressing and turning a suit of armour. These toy spaces thus had layers, both visible and invisible, and generated potential for storytelling beyond the typically domestic, or even fairy tale tropes. They afford access to an alternative, even proto-virtual reality. We find, again and again, the instinctive association of representation, place, and narrative is an urge to which these toys have catered through the ages.

7. Dollhouses (II): Crime

Frances Glessner Lee's 1940s morbid yet endlessly charming *Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* were a series of models of interiors representing a highly detailed crime scene. They were designed to train forensic inspectors, an absolute novelty at the time. This means, they become study devices, images to interiorize and navigate with one's eyes, logic, and memory. Unexpectedly, these bring us back to 19th century interiors.

We had Rice's space-images, keep a pin on those. Rice discusses Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* extensively, which is bound to happen. Benjamin had associated the burgeoning interior with the contemporary trend for detective novels. Film studies scholar Tom Gunning remarks on how Benjamin's turn of the century Parisian rooms are related to artefacts other than dollhouses. He writes "the locus of optical devices and philosophical toys of all sorts - the stereoscope, the kaleidoscope, the magic lantern - that seem to open the viewer's gaze

onto a different world, but only under the dominion of the image and semblance" (107). And it is this heightened gaze-ability that, as Gunning puts it, generates a sort of interior flaneur (109). And as they promenade in these image-spaces, they read the objects and traces upon which they stumble.

This is very close to what I wanted to achieve with my Matterport. I wanted to allow a virtual visitor to roam my space as a way of learning about the research I had just conducted. Nonetheless, it did not work. If you look at Glessner Lee's studies, you immediately feel prompted to decipher a narrative, a sort of spatial reading. You come upon something that has occurred. But when you look at my Matterport dollhouse, you do not. And I suspect this is not just because there is no body to be found in there.

8. At last, on the performative - definition

Richard Schechner, the founder of performance studies, defined performance as "twice behaved behaviour". I find that in my own work, this conception of the performative is more generative than J.L Austin's performative utterances (that is where one's speech has the potential to enact reality, such as when one says "I do" at a wedding, and changes tangible aspects of life).

In the "twice behaved behaviour" definition, the emphasis is in the meta layer - you do something once, and then you re-do it, revealing and reveling in its constructiveness or artificiality.

This doing twice is for me, helpful to think with. Research itself is potentially performative in that it searches and searches again (re-search). The detective stories can be performative in the way detectives try to guess the behaviour that has occurred in the space, and reenact it in order to understand the sequence of events, or even demonstrate their thesis.

In "Images that move: Analyzing affect with Aby Warburg", Kerstin Schankweiler and Philipp Wüschner suggest, following this logic, that there was a performative aspect to Warburg's work, pinning, and re-pinning, and lecturing before an audience about it. What is more, Andrea Krauß, in "Constellations. A Brief introduction" (2011), writes that constellations - and by constellations here we can understand assemblages or even Warburgian atlases - "draw attention to the discursive production of objects of knowledge, work with constellations exposes a self-reflective dimension." (440) So, this, too, points towards a performativity in this way. There is a layer of the discursive work itself, and then a layer of the materiality of this work, revealing at the same time the process and self behind it.

I will give you one more angle to performative concerns. In 1998's "Performing Writing" by Della Pollock, writing is, too, deemed performative (autotheory, a later moniker, is a form of performative writing). Pollock proposes writing as "doing", as opposed to writing as "meaning". Meaning, in this case, is generated in "the act of writing" itself. (75).

I am telling you all this because the digital twin was a performative effort. I wanted it to be performatively written, and performatively received. I wanted to see how a space, and the virtual reenactment and reconceptualisation of space at that, invites performativity. I wanted to use it as a sort of site-specific, atlas-inspired writing device, making the writing not only about the content, but the materiality of the textual encounter, adding a virtual layer to the digital twin of my space - doing, re-doing. So it was performative for me in the sense of how to re-present these texts. But I also wanted a reader to compose and recompose them into a whole through their meandering, making the visit performative in a way, as well.

9. Failure: an attempt at pedagogy

Here are then a few things that may have condemned the project to failure:

- there was no cohesive story. These were fragments of fragments, cherry-picked through my dissertation, without beginning nor end, and there was no satisfactory narrative arch, conclusion or discovery to make.
- The actual research was not an investigation to be conducted in the space, but a diversity of work I had already completed
- The texts were in the space, but not about the space.
- It was not really a stand-alone piece, nor did it really supplement the dissertation.
- the spatial containment made it hard to tell how the autotheory I had developed reached beyond my own life, which is a crucial part of research.
- and more importantly for us here, today, it was my interior, and it was my interiority, but it was way too hard to parse how one reflected on the other, and why it had become virtual.

10. A conclusion from the future

Once I knew I was to talk about the digital twin, I re-subscribed to matterport. It's where the twin still lives, and I wanted to fish out some images for this presentation. As I progressed through the living room, kitchen, bathroom, study, and bedroom, I became entranced. Enough time had passed that the space was not as familiar as I expected. The furniture had changed, the moisturiser by the sink was different, the working space is now elsewhere. The twin is not identical any more, and I was no longer the inhabitant, but the visitor. I was entranced by how powerful the feeling was. How well it worked. I was effectively time travelling in a virtual time capsule.

What I learnt as a visitor, though, was not about my doctoral research, but about a very specific moment and mental space, for me, but also for a society frozen by covid. The rooms are filled with look-what-I-did-! energy, but also doubt. The person who made this really enjoyed being a researcher and a writer, but did not know if she would ever find a position after the PhD. Turns out, the mystery was not in the work, but in the life. Some of the clues of what was to happen were already there, but so much was needed from outside this space, the mystery could never be resolved in this virtual dollhouse. I assigned an imaginary reader the wrong mission, and gave them an incomplete scene.

But as I click along this digital twin of my home in Spring of 2021, I get to occupy it, and occupy myself a-new, a sort of private performance that I was not expecting. And in doing so, I get to read the space with the new information the me of the here and now has access to, some of which I have shared with you today. The virtual space was not an end, but a beginning, which is why I could not close it back then.

Thanks so much for the opportunity to revisit it and finally share it with you. I am looking forward to answering any questions you may have, and continuing this into a conversation. And just in case anyone is curious, here is a QR code that will give you access to the virtual twin, and the full thing on a last slide - maybe you are the detectives I was waiting for. Thanks again.