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Abstract

Surface and Site: a domestic topography
Research into ‘the house’ as a surface upon which lived experience is inscribed and a site that produces and constructs subjectivity. The study engages with the notion of topography as practice: a spatial and situational ‘writing’ of the self through works of art. The Sub-thesis, comprising two papers, investigates representations of loss and mourning in the context of architectural space. The Housing of Loss explores the work of contemporary visual artist Suh Do-Ho, while A Work in Mourning examines Nathaniel Kahn’s feature-length documentary My Architect.

A study taking the form of an exhibition of artworks exhibited at the School of Art Gallery from March 16 to 24, 2006 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (80%), the Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken, plus the Sub-thesis (20%).

Declaration of Originality

I, Stephanie Jones (22/12/2005) hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures – Paper One</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures – Paper Two</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paper One</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Housing of Loss: absence and melancholy in the work of Suh Do-Ho</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paper Two</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Work in Mourning: Nathaniel Kahn’s My Architect</em></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Synopsis</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes prepared for Film Screening 28 July 2005</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures – Paper One

All images works by Suh Do-Ho:

**Fig.1**  

**Fig.2**  
348 West 22nd St... (kitchen and bathroom), 2001 (sourced from <http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/ David_Winton_Bell_Gallery/suh.html [14/11/05])

**Fig.3**  

**Fig.4**  

**Fig.5**  

**Fig.6**  

**Fig.7**  
Reflection, 2004 (sourced from Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York City <http://www.lehmannmaupin.com>)

**Fig.8**  
List of Figures – Paper Two

All images uncropped stills from *My Architect: A Son’s Journey*, directed by Nathaniel Kahn (original 35mm release, New Yorker Films in association with HBO/Cinemax Documentary Films, 2003), New York: New Yorker Video, 2004 [DVD 116min. colour]:

**Fig.1**
Louis Kahn with reflection of Nathaniel Kahn (00:17:43) 32

**Fig.2**
Face of Louis Kahn (00:18:10) 42

**Fig.3**
Hands of Louis Kahn (01:33:08) 42

**Fig.4**
Hands of Louis Kahn (00:32:07) 42

**Fig.5**
Face of Louis Kahn (00:42:15) 42

**Fig.6**
Philip Johnson in his Connecticut garden (00:06:00) 42

**Fig.7**
The Fisher House in its surroundings (01:22:43) 43

**Fig.8**
View of Dhaka city from the Capital building (01:44:09) 43

**Fig.9**
School children inside the Kimbell Art Museum (01:09:24) 43

**Fig.10**
Detail of concrete surface, Salk Institute (00:24:57) 43

**Fig.11**
Nathaniel Kahn watching video of Esther Kahn (01:21:52) 48

**Fig.12**
Nathaniel Kahn rollerblading at the Salk Institute (00:27:14) 48

**Fig.13**
The ceiling of the Exeter Academy Library (01:27:32) 52

**Fig.14**
Nathaniel Kahn in the Exeter Academy Library (01:27:29) 52

**Fig.15**
Nathaniel Kahn facing the Capital of Bangladesh (01:42:27) 55
The Housing of Loss

absence and melancholy in the work of Suh Do-Ho
For even things lost in a house abide...

In Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping* the protagonist Ruth narrates her story from a strangely ambiguous position. It is never clear whether her voice is that of a ghost or simply a transient, living outside the conventional borders of society: “We are drifters”, “we are dead”, and “we are nowhere”, Ruth declares at various points.¹ *Housekeeping* tells the story of a family haunted by loss – accidental death, suicide and homelessness – and of a house whose physical boundaries are transgressed not only by the forces of nature but by the generation of women who inherit it, neglect it and eventually attempt to destroy it. A canonical feminist text, Robinson’s novel has much to say about the practices of domesticity and what happens when women refuse to abide within these conventions. Throughout the narrative identities are formed and resisted in terms of the physical structure of the house, and are played out in terms of an irresolvable opposition between domesticity and vagrancy. In the end, it is this undecidability that lends the story its most interesting aspect. Figured by the uncertain status of the narrator and the ineffable place that she occupies, we are left to ponder the space of absence and the space of loss.

In a previous research paper, *Reading the House: domestic space, feminine subjectivity and the gendered body*, I explored Robinson’s novel in terms of the space of absence, which was one of a number of motifs arising from the suppression of the feminine within historically dominant modes of Western thought and representational systems.² My current research topic, titled *Surface and Site: a domestic topography*, stems from these concerns but shifts into an investigation that references the personal along with the general. In this present context, the house is regarded as both a textual surface and a subjective site, and it is through this twofold framework that I have sought to engage with loss and its attendant themes – memory, mourning, melancholy and longing.

Long before I grasped the direction of this paper, and decided upon the artist Suh Do-Ho, a potential title had already presented itself. *The Housing of Loss* was a

² Submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Letters, Faculty of Arts, Centre for Women’s Studies, Australian National University, 1996.
perplexing but persistent refrain: perplexing because it presented me with a confusing contradiction, which I will shortly address, and persistent in the sense that even when faced with this problem I couldn’t let it go. Grappling with a subject that seemed beyond my comprehension I felt overwhelmingly, but perhaps appropriately, at a loss. This reminded me of the disabling impact of bereavement, when one is compelled to speak even when one struggles to know what to say, perhaps partly in fear of silence itself, but also in the therapeutic belief that meaning or insight will follow speech. In keeping with this analogy, it was only by ‘working through’ these challenges that I realized how my very dilemma indicated the topic itself: “an impossible need to speak of or name the one thing that remains forever beyond speech”.{3} In other words, the paradoxical representation of absence and loss.

Before I take into account the nature of this paradox, I want to lay out some of my early thoughts in relation to the spatial representation of loss. Initially I was thinking about the common sites of mourning and remembrance, a broad range of physical spaces and objects that symbolically ‘house’ what is lost. Examples include public monuments, cemeteries and roadside memorials; museums and other institutions with archiving intentions; and all forms of personal memento-mori, from souvenirs to the family photo-album. Since domestic spaces typically house an enormous and potentially inexhaustible collection of objects invested with the significance of loss, this last category holds particular resonance for me.

The second consideration is the physical structure of the domestic dwelling itself. On the walls, floors and ceilings, within the spaces defined as rooms, and even across the thresholds of ‘in-betweeness’ such as doors, windows and stairs, we may find traces of the past. Thus on the literal surface of the house as well as in the ‘practice’ of its spaces, a history of loss is inscribed. These thoughts are combined with the way that loss is experienced subjectively in what might be called the inhabitation of loss, wherein the body itself is perceived as a form of housing. This metaphoric association of the body and dwelling has a long and substantial history, too vast to explore here, except to observe that perhaps this is why it is rarely open spaces, but almost always houses that are deemed haunted.

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The concept of ‘housing’, therefore, might take on a range of implications, including containment, representation and preservation. Throughout *The Housing of Loss* these different aspects will be maintained as I ask: ‘What is it about architectural space, in particular the domestic dwelling, that signifies loss?’ In response to this question I will examine the work of Suh Do-Ho who engages with the language and forms of architecture through his full-scale replicas of actual domestic spaces. Suh’s delicate silk and nylon installations will be read in terms of material, spatial and metaphorical indicators of absence. In addition, there will be an emphasis on the performative nature of his art, with the implication of his work as an enactment of loss.

Before I embark on this analysis, I would like to take a moment to establish the theoretical framework that has informed this paper. This necessitates a brief survey of notions of subjectivity, embodiment and space, and a look at how these ideas are underscored by concepts of interiority and exteriority. I will consider the ways in which these products of philosophical and psychoanalytical discourse are significantly tied to the spatialization of loss. But first my task is to return to, and unravel, the paradox of this phrase “the housing of loss”.

In *Housekeeping*, the character Ruth presents the reader with a dilemma: her voice speaks from an unknown, un-nameable location, but since she is after all narrating the story, how can she be “nowhere”? When trying to make sense of the housing of loss, a similar contradiction arises. Loss, by definition, describes an absence. It is the effect produced when something – be it person, object, belief or culture – is no longer possessed, practiced or known. To lose something is to cease to have access to it, to no longer be able to keep, maintain or preserve it. On the other hand, the word housing denotes a structure that shelters, encloses or surrounds, while also meaning the act of providing such protection. Accordingly, loss cannot be housed, absence cannot take up space, at least not on this literal level.

However from a phenomenological point of view, loss is experienced as much more than a mere abstracted or indefinable absence. Perceived as a tangible effect, a loss is commonly described as a pain or wound. This kind of injury, furthermore, does not necessarily heal, producing instead a permanent psychic scar:
“If the object can no longer exist in the external world,” writes Judith Butler, “it will then exist internally”.4 This process of internalization — or incorporation in psychoanalytic terms — paradoxically functions as a means of preserving loss. Thus in a therapeutic context the resolution of loss, the idea of letting go, is not in fact brought about by the “full abandonment of the object but [rather] by transferring the status of the object from external to internal”.5 In this light, the housing of loss seems an appropriate metaphor, not only evoking the subjective effects of grief and mourning, but also providing a model for how absence is internalized and given a paradoxical presence.

This twofold example of incorporation reveals how the word housing may operate as either a noun (where housing invokes a container or metaphor for the self) or a verb (where housing expresses action or process). In either sense, however, it functions as a dynamic term: if the self is regarded as a constantly developing being, as opposed to having a pre-given or fixed identity, then even in the first example, housing implies movement over stasis. Thus whenever housing is used in this paper in relation to metaphors of the self, it is done not in the humanist tradition where the body is viewed as a passive container for an autonomous mind, but in the context of more recent theories of subjectivity that presume an always already embodied self and which emphasize the processes of becoming, of production and of construction.

In turn, these notions are significantly tied to the architectural concepts of building, dwelling and practice, to the extent that it is possible to trace “a historical correlation”, to paraphrase Elizabeth Grosz, “between the ways in which space ... is represented, and the ways in which subjectivity represents itself”.6 Or in the words of Anthony Vidler, who also observes a corresponding trajectory between subjectivity and space:

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5 ibid.

6 Elizabeth Grosz, “Space, Time and Bodies”, *On The Beach* (n.13 1988), p.21. In her recent work, Grosz has expanded this idea in greater depth: “The Ptolemaic space-time framework is isomorphic with the prevailing concept of the hierarchically positioned subject, the power structure of master and slave; the Galilean universe could be seen as congruent with the Cartesian concept of the self-given and autonomous subject; the Einsteinian universe in its turn may be correlated with the psychoanalytical fissuring of the subject; and virtual spaces may be correlations of the postmodern subject. The limits of possible spaces are the limits of possible modes of corporeality: the body’s infinite pliability is a measure of the infinite plasticity of the spatiotemporal universe in which it is housed and through which bodies become real, are lived, and have effects.” (*Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, [Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001], pp.32-33).
What has been variously termed the ‘death’ of the subject or its ‘disappearance’ refers to the gradual transformation of the romantic ideal of individuality … and it is not surprising that spatial concepts reveal a similar, parallel history, from an ideal of ‘fullness’ to an increased sense of ‘flattening’ and distortion.⁷

In Vidler’s book, Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture, architectural space is explored in terms of a prevailing subjective disquiet, producing a kind of pathology of space. Concepts such as claustrophobia and agoraphobia are provided as examples of warped space, where the destabilization and transgression of spatial boundaries is correlated with the loss of a contained and self-determined subjectivity. Writing within the disciplines of art and architecture, Vidler appropriates the philosophical discourse of subjectivity and space in order to draw from the spatial anxieties of modern identity “a sense of loss and mourning”.⁸ For this reason, my introduction has been influenced by Vidler’s text and takes a similar approach, adopting the framework of subjectivity and space to make sense of my topic.

At this point it is worth noting that throughout my essay, the term ‘space’ is employed in its most generic sense. Although I will be attending to a particular kind of space – the domestic house – I have not sought to define or to trace the changing historical and philosophical applications of the term. Instead, I have intentionally maintained a broad notion of the term in order to appreciate its full nuances: relating to both the physical and psychological, the concrete and virtual, the real and representational. Given that this paper is formed around the analysis of an artist who has taken on “the question of architecture”,⁹ there will of course be an emphasis on representational space. This kind of space, however, cannot be regarded in isolation,

⁸ ibid., p.2. Elizabeth Grosz argues that the philosophical traditions of “Deconstruction and poststructuralism lend themselves to architectural appropriation insofar as they are already appropriated from architecture. The architectonic remains a guiding philosophical ideal.” (Grosz, Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space [Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001], p.186. Original emphasis).
⁹ Vidler states: “Artists who have taken on the question of architecture, and architects who have taken on the question of art, have in the last decade significantly changed the way in which a genre- and practice-based space might be read. While in the work and theory of the first avant-gardes such interchanges were frequent ... they were by and large undertaken within a general theory of spatial construction as a universal flux, a medium, so to speak, that subsumed and informed all media. Today, however, with the boundary lines between the arts quite strictly drawn, and with no overarching theory of space, the transgression of art and architecture takes on a definite critical role.” Warped Space, pp.10-11.
for it has much to tell us about spatial practice and the experience of lived space.\textsuperscript{10} It is therefore the intersection of these different categories of space that interests me: in the slippage between the real and the representational, in the ways that each informs the other, or, what Vidler describes as

...the complex exercise of projection and introjection in the process of inventing a paradigm of representation, an ‘imago’ of architecture, so to speak, that reverberates with all the problematics of a subject’s own condition.\textsuperscript{11}

In the context of this paper, loss is regarded as one such problematic. According to David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, editors of the anthology \textit{Loss: The Politics of Mourning}, the effects of loss, including mourning and melancholy, emerged in the late twentieth century “as a crucial touchstone for social and subjective formations”.\textsuperscript{12} In the same anthology, Judith Butler claims “belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss”.\textsuperscript{13}

we are, as it were, marked for life, and that mark is insuperable, irrecoverable. It becomes the condition by which life is Risked, by which questions of whether one can move, and with whom, and in what way are framed and incited by the irreversibility of loss itself.\textsuperscript{14}

In these terms, loss is revealed in a constitutive relation to subjectivity, to the extent that we can say, as Butler implies above, that subjectivity is \textit{produced through} the space of loss.\textsuperscript{15}

As with the concept of ‘space’ in this essay ‘loss’ is brought into play as an open or generalized term. Eng and Kazanjian state that loss “names what is apprehended by discourses and practices of mourning, melancholia, nostalgia, sadness, trauma, and depression”, and that losses encompass “the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and

\textsuperscript{10} These three classifications of space are drawn from Vidler’s account of the work of Henri Lefebvre: “For Lefebvre it was important to distinguish between ‘social practice’ properly speaking (the process of the production and reproduction of space, as well as the relationship of society to space); ‘representations of space’, or conceptualized space (the ‘space of planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers’); and ‘representational spaces’ or spaces that are ‘directly lived’, overlaid on actual physical spaces, and appropriated symbolically.” ibid., p.12. Original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{11} ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} ibid., p.472.
\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, in her discussion of Walter Benjamin’s work on the German dramatic form, the \textit{Trauerspiel}, Butler observes that “loss is registered as a certain motion of bodies”. ibid., p.470.
the political". I want to acknowledge here that my study remains detached from the
specific narratives of loss documented as a result of natural disasters, war, genocide,
slavery and colonization, and to a lesser degree, from the particular experiences of
grief that accompany the death of a loved one, disabling physical illness or injury,
the end of a relationship, and other significant life changes. But while I continue to
treat loss in a broad, philosophical sense, this is in no way an attempt to collapse all
losses into the same value, nor to undermine the real and ongoing trauma caused by
any loss regardless of its perceived dimension or importance.

Above all else, loss is examined here as an issue of space. The extent of this
spatiality is demonstrated in the kinds of questions that we might ask: How is loss
inhabited? How do we move through it? How does it shape us? How do we shape it?
Since these are essentially phenomenological questions, it is worth remembering that
in the context of this broad philosophical discipline, ‘spatiality’ refers to the idea of
lived space. Accordingly, such questions also indicate the persistence of spatial
metaphors in relation to the study and interpretation of subjective experience.
Furthermore, the suggestiveness of terms such as ‘shaping’ or ‘being shaped’ points
to the fact that the concept of loss is susceptible to the same historical oscillations
that have framed understandings of subjectivity and space. Contemporary attitudes to
subjectivity and space, for instance, posit that representation flows in a
simultaneously outward and inward movement. In other words, the concerns of the
subject are projected into and onto space at the same time that the experience and
effects of space facilitate the subject’s being. I have chosen to regard loss within this
equation of mutual construction and, in accordance with the model of
introjection/projection described by Vidler above, I want to consider the
representation of loss in both its interior and exterior manifestations.

Within this framework of mutual construction, neither the interior nor the
exterior can be privileged over the other. While this proposition has the appeal of
being more than a mere inversion of binary oppositions – a common strategy used to
reinstate a previously devalued term – it is important to consider that even the
argument for mutual construction might remain supported by a dichotomous logic. In
her collection of essays Architecture from the Outside, Elizabeth Grosz cautions

against routine formulas in critical thinking as she questions the “apparent naturalness” of the relationship between being and building:

How to move beyond the pervasive presumption that subjectivity and dwelling exist in a relation of complementarity, either a relation of containment (space or dwelling contains or houses subjects) or a relation of expression (space or dwelling as the aesthetic or pragmatic expression of subjectivity)? In short, how to think architecture beyond complementarity and binarization, beyond subjectivity and signification?17

No doubt when I first approached The Housing of Loss it was with this standard foundation of containment and expression. I have, however, endeavoured to not take for granted the idea of complementarity, reflecting upon and questioning any dichotomous logic in my own thinking. The issue, it seems, is that we cannot stand outside these traditional structures of knowledge and thus have to contend with working within them. Grosz asserts that her question “cannot and should not be answered but must be continually posed, rigorously raised in such a way as to defy answers”.18 She suggests that binarized categories be “played off” against each other, that we ought to consider the distinction between inside and outside, self and other, not “as a limit to be transgressed, so much as a boundary to be traversed”.19 My desire to read the space of the house in terms of loss is, I hope, one way of achieving such play – where the conceptions of inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, are engaged in a knowing and critical fashion, where the architectural works of Suh Do-Ho present us with a surface to be regarded, and a boundary to be traversed.

17 Grosz, Architecture from the Outside, p.59.
18 ibid.
19 ibid., p.65.
I first encountered the work of Suh Do-Ho at the 2002 Sydney Biennale. His large installation 348 West 22nd St., Apt. A, New York NY 10011, USA at Rodin Gallery, Seoul/Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery/Serpentine Gallery, London/Biennale of Sydney^20 occupied one of the top floor gallery spaces at the Museum of Contemporary Art where it served, I believe, as one of the best illustrations of curator Richard Grayson’s theme (The World May Be) Fantastic. An exact-scale replica of the artist’s New York apartment interior, made from sheer blue-grey and pink nylon and suspended by a discreet system of wires and rods, this artwork hovered quietly in the conventionally hushed space of the museum. While one moved around within the piece this effect intensified: sounds seemed to be absorbed by the fabric and the shadows of other gallery visitors were rendered ghostly on the screen-like walls. Fixtures such as doors, windows, cupboards, appliances, light fittings, toilet, bath and sink were reproduced precisely but somewhat comically in soft, sagging detail. The work fluttered gently in response to even the slightest airflows of bodies in space, exaggerating its ethereal, dream-like quality. All of these factors ensured that West 22nd St appeared, indeed, as if wrought from some fantastic world (Figs.1 & 2).

West 22nd St is one of a number of large architectural works in fabric, predated by Seoul Home/L.A. Home in 1999 (Figs.3 & 4) and followed recently by a series of staircase and gateway forms (Figs.5 – 7).^21 All of these works are strongly affective, immersing the audience via a thorough bodily engagement. In this way they correspond to Susan Best’s definition of affect in contemporary installation art practice because “the body quite literally moves or is moved to the shape of the work”.^22 According to Best, art can be considered affective when:

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^20 Please note that since many of Suh’s artworks have very long titles, I will adopt the abbreviated versions in common usage amongst the writers of articles and catalogue essays. The fact that the unwieldy nature of these titles is actually a significant part of the work will be discussed further on.

^21 Please note that this series of works is considered in my essay in distinction from the remainder of Suh’s practice, which for the most part consists of objects and installations either based upon or constructed from the repetition of many small elements. See for example: Who am we? 1996-2000, wallpaper bearing thousands of miniature faces, sourced from high-school yearbook photographs; Floor 1997-2000 and Public figures 1998-2000, a floor of plate glass and a large monument pedestal, respectively, each upheld by a multitude of cast human figurines; and Some/one 2001, a cloak-like suit of armor constructed from stainless steel military dog-tags – all reproduced in the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 2002 [exhibition catalogue] (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2002), p.19; pp.100-3.

...we are interested in the ways in which we are moved around the installations and by them; the ideas behind the works; the qualities of their construction, operation and spatial arrangement; the materials of which they are comprised, their arrangement, forms, shapes, colours, textures, and so on. In sum, we want to ‘grasp’ such installations in many different ways, we are excited by them and this excitement or interest is a pleasurable entwinement of intellectual, motor and perceptual activity.  

Since Seoul Home, the mode of construction and presentation in all of Suh’s house works has remained unchanged. Starting with a set of meticulous measurements from real architectural space, the artist collaborates with expert Korean seamstresses to draft elaborate patterns. From these, diaphanous fabrics such as silk or nylon are cut and pieced together using both hand and machine sewing techniques. This consistent method of production highlights factors that are both practical and conceptual. Installed, the works are voluminous without being weighty, but when packed down and stored they become extremely compact and readily transportable. At the same time, these prudent features are precisely what lends the works their meaning. The impetus for Seoul Home, for instance, stemmed from Suh’s desire to recreate the space of his family home within his new domestic setting in the United States. It drew upon a specific childhood memory of mosquito nets suspended within the house, and in particular, the way these nets produced a kind of room within a room: “Literally, I was going to install that ... Korean house in my New York apartment ... The experience was about transporting space from one place to another. A way of dealing with cultural displacement.”

This autobiographical narrative, although originally specific to Seoul Home, continues to define Suh’s subsequent architectural works. The entire series evokes themes to do with migration and displacement, memory and nostalgia, longing and loss. When we have access to this autobiographical context, it becomes inseparable from the way we read Suh’s architectural works. And what is revealed through this knowledge is how the relations of subjectivity and space structure the series:

23 ibid. p.221.
24 Transcript of interview with the artist for *Art:21 – Art in the Twenty-First Century* [PBS television documentary series (Season Two, Program Five: “Stories”)] (2003); available from: <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/suh/clip1.html> [14/11/03]. It is perhaps worth noting that the artist’s experience of ‘cultural displacement’ is to a large degree the result of privilege rather than political or economic necessity. Although Suh does not occupy the position of exile or refugee, his narrative is however expressed in terms that are common to the diasporic experience: a sense of alienation or non-belonging; a subjective rupture and subsequent redefinition of self; and a preoccupation with or nostalgia for home.
I came to the United States in my late twenties; it was my first major separation from my family and my country, Korea. My coming to America was both symbolic and dramatic. As a student, I moved every year to find a cheaper place to live. The moving experience was disorienting and that's when I started thinking about space in a more general sense. In America, the dimensions of personal space are very different from those in Korea. I grew up in a traditional Korean house where the walls were thin pieces of paper; neither transparent nor opaque, you could make out the shadows of those who lived there. There was no sense of privacy or personal space. But this was something I only came to realize after living away and gaining a more acute sense of distance.25

Thus through the loss of home Suh gains a new perspective towards the impact of space in terms of subjective development. And this is an attitude that does not simply inform but actually motivates his art practice. It is therefore possible to consider these works as akin to a form of self-portraiture, providing an example where subjectivity is produced through spatial repetitions of departure and return, with an emphasis on movement over stability and stasis.

Here again the material properties of the works illustrate the point. The fact that these substantial installations can be literally folded into a suitcase has not only facilitated their regular and repeated exhibition around the globe – from the biennales of Sydney and Istanbul to major museums in Los Angeles, New York, Vancouver, London, Madrid, Seoul and Tokyo – but mirrors Suh’s identity as someone straddling diverse cultures. Dividing his time between two major cities – Seoul, where these works are largely produced, and New York, which he considers his base – Suh is alternately dubbed a ‘Korean’ and ‘international’ artist.26 Willingly oscillating between these identities the artist, along with his work, exists in a state of permanent transience, always ‘away from home’.27

25 ibid., p.52.
27 Although the contested issues of the East/West dichotomy fall outside the parameters of this paper, it is necessary that I occasionally touch upon them. Because of this, I must also acknowledge my own position in terms of these debates, since the use of Eastern artists by Western writers brings to light two problematic tendencies: either a privileging of issues of ethnic specificity, thereby maintaining the artist’s difference; or an avoidance of the artist’s ethnicity “lest one is accused of being a neo-coloniser” (Joan Kee, “Some Thoughts on the Practice of Oscillation: Works by Suh Do-Ho and Oh Inwhan”, Third Text [v.17, n.2, 2003], p.143). While in many ways an artist like Suh Do-Ho might be seen to transcend cultural divisions, it is important to remember that “Today’s international artists, functioning in the context of globalism, are still embraced for their otherness, their cultural exoticism, but only if that exoticism is bland and non-confrontational” (Susan Platt, “Do-Ho Suh by Lisa G Corrin and Miwon Kwon and The Art of Xu Bing: Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words by Britta Erickson” [book review], The Art Book [v.10, n.2, 2003], p.34). This is echoed by David
Given Suh’s preoccupation with what he calls “the transportability of space”,
the recent staircase pieces are both a logical extension of the architectural series and
an appropriate metaphor for the nomadic lifestyle of the artist:

Stairs are not spaces in which you can be passive and stationary, but are sites
of movement and dynamism, diagonals of space that cut through a building,
linking floors and people. They do not exist in their own right, but are
connectors, fragments of a building that offer transition rather than finality.  

Like West 22nd St, the staircase works are drawn from the New York building in
which Suh currently resides, but this time the focus has shifted from his living space
to the area immediately adjacent. Staircase IV, for example, replicates the flight of
stairs leading to his neighbour’s apartment – the vast sheet of red representing the
unfamiliar floor space directly above his own. While again referring to Suh’s cross-
cultural transition, these works are also broadly concerned with interpersonal space,
where the regular separation of self and other, like inside and outside, is a repeatedly
traversed boundary. Because stairs are all about movement through and between
spaces, they indicate the idea of the threshold, a space where time and being are
sometimes held in suspension:

I’m not at the bottom,
I’m not at the top;
So this is the stair
Where
I always
Stop.
Halfway up the stairs
Isn’t up,
And isn’t down.
It isn’t in the nursery,
And isn’t in the town.
And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run inside my head:
“IT isn’t really
Anywhere!
It’s somewhere else
Instead.”  

McNeill who claims that “the international art world (which is in truth anything but international)
demands ... a judicious mix of the familiar and the novel” (“Home and Host: Contemporary Asian Art
and Diaspora”, Broadsheet [v.33, n. 3, 2004], p.28).

A.A. Milne, “Halfway Down”, When We Were Very Young (1924), (London: Methuen and Co.,
In all of Suh’s architectural works, this notion of the threshold or liminal space is reinforced through the medium of fabric. Sculpture made from fabric frequently implies an association with feminine handicrafts, thereby reasserting a traditional concept of domesticity, but at the same time, the portable and collapsible quality of Suh’s objects undermines the view of the house as a fixed or permanent edifice. Since the walls of these spaces are at once screen and membran, we are encouraged to think of projection as well as transmission, or the way that images and ideas may be simultaneously captured and passed on. Like all physical boundaries, these walls separate as well as connect space. However, because they are tactile, quivering, and most importantly, transparent, the conventional binary of inside and outside is disrupted, and we are brought back always to the threshold. Here undecidability reigns since liminal space, like the space of absence, is *neither and both*.

The space of absence is at the very heart of Suh’s architectural works. Anecdotal accounts about the actual dwelling upon which *Seoul Home* is based claim that the house, built by Suh’s father, was modelled after a nineteenth century cottage that stands in the grounds of the Royal Palace. But this original dwelling is itself a facsimile, erected as an ‘authentic’ example of domestic architecture, a kind of novelty for the emperor of the time. Thus in *Seoul Home* the figure of the house, used by the artist to signify a connectedness to tradition and roots, folds back on itself through time, in a sequence of displacement, to be revealed as “just a copy of a copy of a copy”. However, this doesn’t necessarily imply that the house is an empty sign, mere simulacrum, for this narrative illustrates how Suh’s particular notion of home is already inscribed by loss. Strategically Suh displaces displacement, and in the case of *Seoul Home*, this tactic echoes a pre-existing condition of double displacement – thus always already housed.

Since Suh’s architectural works play out the production of subjectivity through the space of loss, it is appropriate that the particular metaphor employed – the house – has a long association with ideas of embodiment. The very concept of

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30 In a further twist, David McNeill claims that the Suh “family cottage is now being used as a model for the restoration of the original in the palace gardens, as it is considered the most authentic surviving template for traditional vernacular architecture!”; “Home and Host”, p.31.

31 ibid.
inhabitation is born out of a bodily having of space, and the house has traditionally been framed as an ideal space of protection and nurture for the body. A loss of home, therefore, threatens to destabilize the certainty of the body-space relationship, thereby disrupting subjective boundaries. Suh’s early experience in the United States is described in the terms this type of disturbance: “I really felt that I was just dropped from the sky. Like you’re suddenly living in somebody else’s body”. Not surprisingly then Suh refers to Seoul Home as his “parachute”, a figure of protection against “the trauma of his descent in unfamiliar terrain”. This parachute-house therefore operates like an extension of the body, facilitating its transition into foreign territory and the annexation of new spatio-subjective boundaries.

The material nature of Suh’s fabric houses lends itself to another set of metaphors that illustrate the idea of the body’s intimate relationship with space. But in this instance, when the works are likened to clothing, skin or cocoons, the embodied situation of the viewer is also invoked. This analogy is emphasized by the 1:1 scale of Suh’s living rooms and the way they appear to ‘fit’ us like our own homes. At the same time, this sense of reality is contradicted by the physical properties of the work – rooms with a barely-there quality, like paper-thin skin or gossamer garments, prove insubstantial as shelter, not able to contain anyone or thing except some kind of ghostly matter. This uncanny effect exerts “a peculiar influence on one’s sense of physicality”, heightening the audience’s “sense of their own presence and ‘realness’ in comparison to the fragility of the installation”. The fact that these spaces are not properly inhabitable creates a paradoxical result: the absence described by these works is transferred to us, the viewer, so that we are also displaced, while at the same time this very absence reaffirms our own being and our profound connection to space.

32 Bernd Jager evokes the etymology of the Latin hab- when he writes: “‘To inhabit’ refers to a kind of having (habere) that permits us a radical access to material objects and allows us to treat these objects as extensions of our own body”; “Body, house and city: The intertwinnings of embodiment, inhabitation and civilization”, in David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer, eds. Dwelling, Place and Environment: towards a phenomenology of person and world (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), p.219.

33 One of the most famous examples being Gaston Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space (La poétique de l’espace, 1958), trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994).


Of all Suh’s architectural works, this transference between artist and audience is particularly apparent in *West 22nd St*. Because it rests lightly on the ground and is accessible to the viewer, *West 22nd St* welcomes us, invites us to traverse its rooms, and permits us to examine its surface in detail. But no evidence of an inhabitant will ever be uncovered – there are no physical traces here, no furniture, no objects left casually about. Suh wanted to reproduce the apartment as it was when he first moved in, the only fixtures being those integrated within the architecture, and this lends the work a generic quality, like any small flat in any large city or urban centre.

One commentator was inclined to read this as a sign of Suh’s emotional detachment: “We can enter the *house* ... without having registered any emotions regarding the artist’s *home*”. Certainly, inside *West 22nd St* we are just visitors, our function prescribed to simply ‘passing through’. Yet the emptiness of the space remains highly charged. It therefore becomes a performative space, enabling the audience to act out their own memories of displacement and longing, to project individual subjectivities into a shared, social space. Suh’s installations therefore engage us with what Susan Best calls a “projective identification”. This is a term drawn from psychoanalysis and it describes a phenomenon through which, according to Best, “we bestow on these [art] objects attributes of the self”. Furthermore, “the identification appears to be centrifugal: from us, outwards”. In this sense, perhaps *West 22nd St* best demonstrates Suh’s notion of the transportability of space, since within this installation we occupy not an isolated but a common space of loss, degrees of which, upon leaving, we will carry with us.

Ultimately this “performative transference” suggests a kind of gain rather than loss, and this is further played out in the way that Suh titles many of the works. In *Seoul Home*, for example, it is not only the tent-like structure of the work that makes obvious its transportable nature, but its increasingly unwieldy title which documents the work’s exhibition history – collecting and announcing the various destinations to which it has travelled, like a set of luggage tags or bumper stickers.

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37 To the best of my knowledge, the only installation version where you could get really ‘close’ to *Seoul Home*, was in its first showing at the LA Korean Cultural Centre. Here, the work was suspended between two floors and it appears that you could ascend a curved staircase through the piece, exiting through a split in the fabric, somewhat like the door-flaps of a tent (see Fig.4).


The latest version reads *Seoul Home/LA Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home*, and to this might soon be added *Tokyo Home*, since the piece was recently installed at the Mori Art Museum in Japan. This “absurd run-on title”, writes Frances Richard, is “as weighty as the object is flimsy”.

Through the title, this object – the house – is transformed into a document of transcontinental, transcultural passage, such that the *Seoul Home* project as a whole reads as a physical enactment of its themes:

> Each time the piece is shown, its link to an original or fixed location is further diluted, and the virgules that punctuate its title multiply until permanence dissolves into its own shadow ... And this no-place abode is still evolving ... [its] obsessive nomenclature proliferates into unsayability, the linguistic corollary of an endless – but insouciant – displacement.42

*Seoul Home* is indeed a repeatedly displaced object, but what Richard seems to imply, above, is that the ongoing nature of this displacement results in a kind of vanishing act. I would argue, however, that this repetition actually effects a paradoxical reinstatement of the object and its meaning. As this apparition-like house appears, disappears and reappears around the globe, both the idea of home that it represents and the loss of home that it enacts, are not simply displaced but continually re-placed. Suh claims that the project was intended as a way of overcoming loss, but this idea is founded upon the aim of ‘taking it with you’ rather than ‘leaving it behind’. Suh’s project pre-empts and prepares for the inevitability of loss by rehearsing it over and again, thereby producing a loss that is not assuaged but instead restored and sustained. *Seoul Home* signifies a departure that is endlessly repeated, an absence that is ever present, and a loss that is paradoxically made visible.

According to Susette Min, curator of the exhibition *The Mourning After: art of loss* (Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1999), this paradox is the hallmark of many contemporary art works that deal with issues of loss. By identifying the common artistic strategies of repetition, substitution and refabrication, Min observes a “compulsion to preserve loss by suspending and controlling time through space”.43 Min draws upon psychoanalytic discourse to read the representation of loss in terms of grieving and the function of incorporation. In mourning, ‘the lost object’ is

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42 ibid.
43 Min, “Remains to Be Seen”, pp.230-1.
typically compensated by and reinvested through a complex set of impulses, each seeking to contain, and thereby preserve the grieving subject’s loss. The lost object is reinstated through memory, often with the aid of physical remnants such as mementoes or fetishes, yet despite the fact that the loss may be substituted in this way, the replacement remains always incompatible or inadequate. It is for this reason that the process is repeated and this is why incorporation is never completed or resolved.

Suh’s architectural works support Min’s three-fold model by constructing the notion of home as the lost object, and by refabricating, substituting, and repeating this loss through the visual metaphor of the house. Suh’s own description of the genesis of Seoul Home clearly parallels Min’s argument:

I think this notion of home is something that you can infinitely repeat … I mean at some point in your life you have to leave your home. And whenever you go back it’s just not the same anymore. I think home is something that you carry along with your life … the process of making the Korean project has a really important meaning to it because in order to make that piece you have to measure every inch of the space … and that brings back all the memories of your childhood … this space becomes part of you … It’s in you…

Min’s claims are furthered by her application of the theory of melancholia, drawn primarily from Freud but also relying on the accounts of Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler. In her catalogue essay for The Mourning After, Min writes:

In melancholia an object is paradoxically both possessed and lost at the same time. … Consequently [the fetish] is at once the sign of something and its absence. The obsession with the fetish and the ego’s persistence in denying loss leads to an accrual, an excess, a saturation …

Suh has asserted that through his projects he has found a way to overcome loss: “I didn’t want to sit down and cry for home”, he says; “I decided not to be sad about it”; and, “I don’t really get homesick”. But Suh’s repeated enactment of
displacement, as I have argued, contributes to a paradoxical reinstatement of loss. I have also demonstrated how the repeated exhibition of Suh’s objects – particularly in the case of Seoul Home, with its accruing self-referential title – produces a form of excess or saturation. In light of this contradiction, I believe it is possible to view Suh’s architectural works – his housings of loss – as profoundly melancholic.

Judith Butler has observed how Freud initially defined melancholy as the unfinished process of grieving. Yet, she explains, Freud later acknowledged the unsatisfactory tendency of this definition for it fails to account for the persistence of melancholy before or without death. The melancholic may recognize or anticipate loss prior to any actual loss having taken place, and for Butler this is evident when the subject “mimes” a loss that is impossible to mourn: “Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to preserve the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss.” Melancholic incorporation, as Butler calls it, enables the subject to disavow the loss and thus be protected from suffering.

It is possible to see these processes in action in Suh’s architectural works, whether they deal with actual loss, in the case of Seoul Home, or anticipated or projected loss, in the case of West 22nd St and the Staircase series. And since these works simultaneously refuse and reinstate loss, we might ask – as Min does in her essay – whether the artist succeeds in defying or deferring these losses. Do Suh’s installations successfully mourn the idea of home? or endlessly defer this mourning? And what exactly constitutes home? Suh and his works seem to be ‘at home in the world’, but does this mean ‘at home anywhere’? or ‘at home nowhere’? In order to contemplate these questions I would like to consider one final work, titled The Perfect Home (Fig.8).

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50 ibid., p.134. (original emphasis)
51 ibid.
Whereas West 22nd St was originally created as a counterpoint to Seoul Home, setting up a dichotomy of geography and culture, in The Perfect Home Suh draws attention to and addresses this binary opposition. In this project a new, all-white version of Seoul Home was merged with West 22nd St, the Korean living space linked to the New York apartment via the long pink corridor of the latter. A second variant, The Perfect Home II, included a green staircase leading towards a non-existent second floor. According to commentary published at the time, Suh next plans to fabricate the small strip of land outside his apartment’s ground floor windows and will add this to the next showing. The Perfect Home could thus grow exponentially – The Perfect Home III, ...IV, ...V and so on. In this way, it would engage in a process similar to that of Seoul Home, where repetition and circulation makes the work’s hybridized cultural identity increasingly visible, and where each addition produces an excessive gain, ironically contradicting the very notion of perfect.

In The Perfect Home the dualities of East/West and home/away are destabilized and fused into one ‘ideal’ form. Additionally, the work unites a whole other range of binary oppositions, from the fact that the Korean house is a complete building while the apartment is a fragment of one, to distinctions in scale that reflect cultural specificities of personal space; from the differently signified fabrics (silk as traditional, nylon as contemporary) to the various interpretations and contrasts of their colours (white as either blank or ghostly, pink as visceral/vaginal, blue-grey as neutrally modern, green as growth). Yet the hybrid identity of The Perfect Home is obviously a fantastic space, not attainable in reality. This echoes the fact that melancholia “is a discourse about the impossibility of the subject possessing the object”. But it also indicates the paradoxically productive potential of the melancholic imagination, where “an interruption or a gap” complicates “the narrative of melancholia” and opens “a point of entry into a world where objects become

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52 West 22nd St was first exhibited as part of the exhibition My Home is Yours, Your Home is Mine at the Rodin Gallery, Samsung Museum, Seoul, in 2000, while concurrently Seoul Home was included in Greater New York at PS1, Long Island, New York (Curriculum Vitae of the artist in PDF available from <http://www.lehmannmaupin.com>).

53 The Perfect Home was created for the Kemper Museum, Kansas City, in 2002, and The Perfect Home II exhibited at Lehmann Maupin, NYC, in 2003.


something new, something different”. This is poetically illustrated by Theresa Bembnister who interviewed the artist during the time *The Perfect Home* was installed at the Kemper Museum:

Suh gestures toward the far wall of the Seoul home. A museum bench and the stark white gallery wall are visible through the translucent material, but Suh is looking somewhere far beyond that. “That’s the south. It’s built on a hill,” he says, describing the view from the windows in Korea. “I see a pine tree. It’s beautiful. Particularly this view is very, very beautiful.”

So perhaps it the union of these two culturally specific domestic spaces that makes them perfect, in other words, a successful realization of the desire to have both at once. Or maybe it’s the ability and freedom to move between these homes, maintained in their differences, that represents an ideal? For Suh, might a ‘perfect home’ imply two separate but connected abodes, or an overlapping and merging of the two? Of course, it is impossible to really answer such speculative questions. Similarly, the only satisfactory answer to the issue of whether loss is defied or deferred in the work of Suh Do-Ho, would be to respond ‘both and neither’. These ambiguous conclusions are supported by Suh’s preoccupation with liminal space: “where I am now is neither *this* space nor *that* one. Maybe *here*, somewhere in between”. Accordingly, Suh’s work offers a resolution based on the idea of oscillation and at the same time a recognition of the impossibility of that resolution. And all of this concurs with the artist’s recent assertion that “process is more important than actually trying to reach the answer”.

Earlier in this paper I introduced Vidler’s thesis of warped space. In many ways the installations of Suh Do-Ho map out Vidler’s model, producing an “imago” of architecture through the “anxieties” of distortion and blurring, folding and flattening, transparency and transportability. But the subjective disquiet enacted by these works is not in the end problematic nor pathological, but rather, a condition of agency or productivity. Suh’s architectural series thus demonstrates the idea of ‘becoming’ through loss, where melancholy need not represent “the foreclosure of

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56 Min, “Remains to Be Seen”, p.231
58 ibid. Original emphasis.
the world but rather the potential engagement with the world and its objects".\textsuperscript{60} This is a prescient kind of melancholy, emerging as "the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost" – "opening 'a space for the existence of the unreal' – a politics of ideality".\textsuperscript{61}
Bibliography

Film


Books


Journal Articles


Exhibition Catalogues


Electronic Sources


A Work in Mourning

Nathaniel Kahn’s *My Architect: A Son’s Journey*
The act of mourning ... becomes a continued way of 'speaking to' the other who is gone, even though the other is gone, in spite of the fact the other is gone, precisely because that other is gone. ¹

Close up: a microfiche machine, its greenish monitor screen filling the entire space of the cinematic frame. A whirring sound as horizontal lines of blurred newspaper text whiz past. Glimpses of a male figure reflected in the glass. A rising string score accompanies the whirs and clicks of the microfiche reel as it stops then starts again. The film’s titles now appear at each paused moment. Here, an astute spectator might observe a few textual clues on the stilled pages beneath: a page of real estate listings, for example; and the odd word or phrase, like “PASSPORT” and “Follow the scent...”. As the machine’s operator slows his search, his reflection becomes more visible: a white collar and dark blazer, clean-shaven chin, full lips, a well-defined nose. In the passing black gap between pages, we see him murmur. “Here we go” is what he says, though it’s barely audible. A front page of The New York Times, the date out of focus. The camera scans downwards. A headline too blurry to make out, a photograph of President Nixon, a jerky fade to the bottom right corner. The first two paragraphs of an obituary “Louis I. Kahn Dies; Architect Was 73”. Zoom in, and a male voice reads:

Louis I. Kahn, whose strong forms of brick and concrete influenced a generation of architects and made him, in the opinion of most architectural scholars, America’s foremost living architect, died Sunday evening, apparently of a heart attack, in Pennsylvania Station.

During narration, cut to another page of newsprint: a black and white photograph of the architect posed before a concrete edifice, 1960s-style dark rimmed glasses, hair almost white, strong hands resting one on the other. Zoom out to reveal full article and top of page “THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 1974”. Fade back to photograph, pan right and down to second-last sentence as the narrator reads again: “Besides his wife, Mr. Kahn leaves a daughter Sue Ann.”

The feature length documentary My Architect: A Son’s Journey thus begins—establishing both historical context and an emotionally charged tone. Written and directed by Nathaniel Kahn, My Architect is structured around a compelling narrative which Kahn himself inhabits—as subject, interviewer and interrogator. Throughout this journey, it is his voice that guides the audience, all the while musing upon the search, what it yields, and upon his own feelings, which are often ambivalent. Yet despite the first person possessive of the title, it is difficult to label My Architect

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2 Nathaniel Kahn, Dir., My Architect: A Son’s Journey (New York: New Yorker Video, 2004 [original 35mm release, New Yorker Films in association with HBO/Cinemax Documentary Films, 2003]), (DVD 116min. colour). Please note: only the Director is hereafter referred to by the surname Kahn; I will identify his father as either Louis Kahn, Louis or Lou, depending upon context.
autobiographical, since we learn very little about the younger Kahn and his own life story. But neither is the film a conventional biography, for it is not simply ‘about’ his father, the renowned twentieth century architect Louis I. Kahn. *My Architect*, then, might best be described as memoir, a genre that is of course synonymous with autobiography but which can alternatively mean “an essay or dissertation on a learned subject closely studied by the writer”\(^3\). Memoir recognizes the ‘specialist’ status of the author and the intimate knowledge he or she brings to their topic. And by extension, this definition implies the notion of interiority, whereby the author inhabits the text so that it might be read as an *enactment* of his/her concerns. More on this later.

In *My Architect* there is no pretence of neutrality or objectivity – Kahn is intent on a journey of personal discovery and it is this course that determines the sequential structure of the film. Following the obituary scene, the film fades straight to black and white archival footage of Louis Kahn. He is walking in a park, perhaps in his home town Philadelphia, and this is presented in slow-motion, a conventional trope used to conjure the distinguished figure from the past and frame him through the lens of time. But here, this filmic device also operates like a caress, the slowing down of motion and time mirroring the searching, lingering gaze of the grieving son in his efforts to connect with what he has lost. Thus the late Louis Kahn’s movements are rendered graceful and languid, the shadows of trees fall across his face so that he slips in and out of the light in a fluid but elusive way. Over these images, the voice-over recommences and Nathaniel Kahn identifies himself:

When I first read that obituary, I have to admit, I was looking for my own name. I was his child too. His only son. I didn’t know my father very well. He never married my mother and he never lived with us … He died when I was eleven.

Here the film cuts to a sequence of family snapshots, followed by views of a desolate New York City railway station, and finally, a misty, watery landscape occupied by silent monolithic structures. Kahn’s continuing narration now describes the impetus of the project:

The circumstances of [my father’s] death have always fascinated me. He was bankrupt and alone, on his way back home from India. He collapsed in the downstairs men’s room in Penn Station, New York. The police couldn’t identify him because for some unknown reason, he crossed out the address on his passport. They took him to the city morgue, where he lay unclaimed for

three days. What was he thinking at the end? ... Had he really decided to leave his wife and come and live with us, like my mother said? For years I struggled to be satisfied with the little piece of my father’s life I’d been allowed to see. But it wasn’t enough. I needed to know him.

In this way, *My Architect* alludes to the genre of the detective story, and to a degree, this analogy persists throughout the film. A mysterious death, scarce physical evidence, interviews with witnesses, uncovered secrets, slippery traces, a protracted search (over five years) to piece together the ‘truth’. But there is yet another, more classical tale at work. In this odyssey a son grapples with the legacy of a legendary father, the illegitimate child asserts his rightful claims, and the errors of history are retrieved and amended so that ultimately, it is the son’s identity that emerges. In the film Kahn remarks that his father “cast a long shadow” over his life. However, through this cinematic construction/reconstruction of the past, the younger Kahn is able to stand up and step into the spotlight: “The whole film,” he comments in a post-production interview, “is a parenthetical phrase to that obituary”.\(^4\) Or, in Rhonda Lieberman’s words:

> a stunningly literal “return of the repressed” – rewriting the Great Man’s story from the point of view of someone close who had been edited out. In nearly every segment of *My Architect*, the filmmaker “outs” his dead dad’s secrets to colleagues, clients, anyone who knew him, as he inserts himself into the “official story” that excluded him.\(^5\)

Thus *My Architect* is also written as an ‘alternative obituary’ and in conformity with this ‘genre’ Kahn’s documentary serves a dual function: it pays tribute to the public life and accomplishments of Louis Kahn and it “bears witness to a unique, personal relationship with the deceased”.\(^6\) Kahn is the principal stakeholder of this ‘text’, and his multiple investment (emotional, financial and professional) is made clear right from the start. The film’s very title, the “my” of *My Architect*, announces Kahn’s ownership of the film and its story, as well as the particular affiliation to his subject. But the title also indicates the procreative relationship of father to son, which Kahn admits: “he is literally ‘my architect’ as he is partially the designer of me”.\(^7\) In this sense the film pays tribute, gives thanks and even acknowledges a certain debt.

\(^5\) ibid.
\(^7\) Kahn in interview with Carol Murphy, “Between A Brick And A Hard Place”, *Film Ireland Magazine* date unknown. <http://www.filmireland.net/exclusives/myarchitect.htm> [09/09/05].
We might consider this a form of reckoning, an idea that I explore later in this essay in relation to Jacques Derrida’s work on death and mourning.

For now I would like to account for my initial interest in *My Architect* and the preconceptions that I first brought to the film. I approached *My Architect* already equipped with themes developed in my first sub-thesis paper, in particular, an interest in the intersections of loss and architectural space, implying both the spatial representation of loss and the phenomenology of loss. My current investigation remains underscored by the theory of interiorization, or incorporation, which I see as a clear sign of the prevalent spatial metaphors applied to understandings of grief, mourning, melancholy, and absence. As Derrida writes, “When we say [that the dead are] ‘in us’, when we speak so easily and so painfully of inside and outside, we are naming space, we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes, an orientation of perspectives.” This “rhetoric of space”, as he calls it, “has to do less with the fact that one sees something in it than with the fact that one is seen there in it.” When I began to think about how I might approach *My Architect*, this notion of interiority persisted: what drew me to the film was precisely the fact that Kahn is positioned within his text, it is after all “a son’s journey”.

In this regard I was reminded of Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, a treatise on photography that is at the same time a meditation on death and mourning, written in the wake of his mother’s passing. Like Kahn, Barthes openly declares a singular investment in his topic, which is explicated via a first person narrative and played out in a dialogue of personal motivation, theoretical concern and general reflection. But more than this, there is “the need to know”, as Kahn puts it, the very premise that drives the work – something that Barthes spells out immediately in his opening paragraph: “I was overcome with an ‘ontological’ desire”, and again later: “I was interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound; I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I

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8 Here, representation infers not only the products of visual art, literature, cinema etc., but also academic discourses such as philosophy and psychoanalysis; phenomenology is defined broadly as the interpretation of experience (and the structure of experience) from a situated and embodied point of view.
10 ibid. p160.
think". Camera Lucida is a text born out of affect, and what continues to intrigue me about My Architect is a similar model of “affective intentionality” (CL 21), not merely in terms of the personal journey enacted by the filmmaker on screen, but in the emotional responses it engendered within me, first as spectator and now as commentator.

When seeking a way to explore the resonances of My Architect, I therefore turned instinctively to Barthes’s concept of the punctum. Given how the framework of mourning underwrites his text, it is not surprising that Barthes’s theory of the punctum is developed through an account of wounding or pain – the punctum is defined as that “which rises out of the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (CL 26). Since the punctum is so frequently cited, singled out as it were, it must be remembered that it is bound to its reciprocal term, the studium – “It is a matter of a co-presence” (CL 42). Put simply the studium is the field, where one’s general interest lies, the collectively recognized meaning of the photograph, which is available to anyone – where the “studium is ultimately always coded, the punctum is not” (CL 51). The punctum is highly subjective, a “detail” that “overwhelms the entirety of my reading” (CL 49). Its function is to punctuate, interrupt and ultimately rupture the studium, but only ever for the individual spectator – “It exists only for me” (CL 73).

Following Barthes then, I set out to contemplate the scenes from My Architect that had affected me, that stood out from the field of interesting people and their stories, the powerful architecture, and the prevailing mood of sadness. I recalled the


12 I recognize that Camera Lucida addresses photography not cinema, and to appropriate the concept of the punctum within a filmic context might prove to be problematic, especially given Barthes’s stated preference for photography over cinema. However, I would argue that Barthes’s text remains relevant in the case of My Architect for two reasons. First, because we are dealing with a work that employs a substantial number of photographs, all typical of the images that Barthes privileges (historical and domestic themes, largely figurative), and that the documentary format repeats the direct gaze or frontal pose of the photographic, a feature disavowed by conventional dramatic cinema (“in film, no one ever looks at me: it is forbidden – by the Fiction [CL 111]). Second, it is possible to view “Photography” as incidental to Barthes’s main trajectory, the ‘real’ subject of Camera Lucida being instead mourning and the representation of loss (see Patrick Maynard, The Engine of Visualization: Thinking Through Photography [Ithaca, NY, 1997] as cited by James Elkins, “What Do We Want Photography to Be? A Response to Michael Fried”, Critical Inquiry v.31, n.4, 2005. p.939). For references on the use of Barthes’s theory of the punctum in film studies see: Jan van Eyck, “Death 24 times a second: the tension between movement and stillness in the cinema”, bbooksz av <http://www.bbooks.de/jve/eyck-mulvey.html>; and Tim Groves, “Cinema/Affect/Writing”, senses of cinema [website], <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/25/writing_cinema_affect.html>.
moments that had seemed more than simply poignant, places in the film where my own wounds were briefly opened and I was unsuspectingly pricked, stung or bruised. I found there were three scenes that punctuated my experience of watching *My Architect*. Although identifying these moments was a relatively easy process, given that in each instance I underwent a strongly affective response, it was extraordinarily difficult to translate this experience for the purposes of this paper. The only way I could fully account for my reactions here would be to enter into the territory of self-revelation, which is something I have no intention of doing, and which anyway would undermine the essentially restricted nature of the punctum as Barthes defined it. As James Elkins writes, critical of what he calls the popular “subscription” to Barthes’s terminology:

The punctum is used to speak about viewers’ responses that are taken to be idiosyncratic, unpredictable, or essentially incommunicable; yet by citing the punctum to theorize such responses, historians and critics make it public and accessible to other readers, which is, I take it, the exact opposite of what Barthes intended.

Having so far adopted Barthes’s strategy of “affective intentionality”, I thus reached a dilemma in my investigation. The exact nature of this problem is explored by Graham Allen, who addresses the subjective nature of Barthes’s concept: if one is able to “communicate the existence of the punctum”, if it can be expressed in “the order of the socially communicable”, it is thereby transformed into the studium.

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13 These are of course all Barthes’s terms.
14 For example, while in every one of these three scenes I wept, it was not until subsequent viewings (and a more detached attitude) that I realized each of these scenes involved a person reduced to tears on screen. This raised a whole area of interest that unfortunately I couldn’t accommodate within the structure of this essay – issues like: the simultaneously public and private space of the movie theatre and the codes of audience behaviour, including the performative transference of emotion; Barthes’s resistance to intentionality and theatricality on the part of the “Operator” (see Michael Fried, “Barthes’s Punctum”, *Critical Inquiry* v.31, n.3, 2005. pp.539-574); and crying in general – “Our best understandings of tears come not from the medical and psychological sciences but from innumerable poetic, fictional, dramatic, and cinematic representations of the human proclivity to weep ... What does it mean that at times of victory, success, love, reunion, and celebration, the outward signs of our emotional interiority are identical to those of our most profound experiences of loss?” (Tom Lutz, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* [New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company], 1999. p.19). Note also that Kahn deleted any scenes from the film where he became visibly emotional: “When you’re a character in your own story, there’s always the danger of becoming too operatic” (in interview with Martin C. Pedersen, “My Architect, Myself”, *The Metropolis Observed* June 2003, <http://www.myarchitectfilm.com/articles/metropolisl.html> [25/07/05]).
For Allen therefore, “Barthes’s text confronts an impossibility that has to do with language”.¹⁷

Interestingly, in Camera Lucida Barthes recognizes that the theory of the punctum, as he has so far developed it, is no longer tenable. In Part Two of his text he subsequently abandons the idea of the punctum-as-detail, offering instead a theory of the punctum of photography itself, which is to say, the “fatality” of the image (CL 96). It is this secondary concept of the punctum that I believe proves a more useful approach for My Architect. For Barthes, photography is profoundly morbid: “the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility ... glued together limb by limb” (CL 5-6). In My Architect, the archival images of Louis Kahn are an excellent example of this affect, the use of inset photographs reiterating what Barthes calls “the simple click” separating life and death (CL 92). Ironically, when Kahn incorporates photographic stills within his film to achieve a reinforced sense of loss, what also seems to happens is that the past comes back to life, animated within the motion picture. This corresponds with a traditional dichotomy where photography equals death and cinema represents life – an opposition that might even be inferred within Barthes’s text since he writes:

... in the Photograph, something has posed in front of the tiny hole [of the lens] and has remained there forever ... but in cinema, something has passed in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous set of images (CL 78, original emphasis).

And also:

... in the cinema, no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts ... it does not cling to me: it is not a specter. Like the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, “the experience will constantly flow by in the same constitutive style”; but the Photograph breaks the “constitutive style” (this is its astonishment); it is without future (CL 89-90, original emphasis).

Kahn’s film relies on an enormous amount of archival footage, both moving and still. He tells us that his agenda was to select images of Louis doing everyday things, so that he might view his father as an ordinary man.¹⁸ Initially Louis is presented as a fairly detached character: official news photographs portray a man

¹⁷ ibid.
¹⁸ Kahn in Pedersen, “My Architect, Myself”. See also Question and Answer session with the Director (Q5. “The archival footage”), bonus feature on DVD version.
“deeply engaged in his own thoughts, focused and oblivious”,\(^1^9\) while documentary film outtakes show a character constantly in motion, walking the streets, observing the city, disappearing around corners or into buildings. As Kahn remarks, “for a while you [only] see little glimpses of him, which was always the way I saw him”.\(^2^0\) But as the film progresses more is revealed: photographs of Louis as a boy, at university, at work in his office, with the various members of his unconventional ‘family’. Kahn also incorporates more and more sustained pieces of existing footage into the structure of his film. He has the camera zoom in to extreme close-ups, lingering on details such as Lou’s hands and facial features, including the terrible scars on his face (Figs.2–5). He also includes sound bites of his father’s voice, so that we become accustomed to Louis ‘speaking over’ the film. What Kahn consequently achieves is the evolution of his father into a ‘real’ man, his becoming ‘alive’ in parallel to the unfolding of the narrative.

Technically, however, this ‘life’ that cinema represents is an illusion, since the motion picture is constructed from a succession of still frames, simply presented at a speed undetectable to the eye. Thus, and particularly in the case of this documentary, I don’t think Barthes’s opposition of cinema and photography holds. Indeed, Kahn’s film is a particularly good example of the blurring of this distinction. Kahn says that “film literally allows you to have a scene in which you are talking to someone who’s dead! And having a dialogue with them – and on the screen you are both equally ‘alive’ ”.\(^2^1\) Barthes claims that the cinema is not melancholic, but if we apply his idea of the fatality of the image to My Architect, we might say in response to Kahn that both figures on screen are equally dead. This relates to Barthes’s idea of “future death” (CL 97), where he suggests that what the spectator views is not simply death, in the sense that something in the past has taken place, but that which is already dead, since from the moment of capture the image is a sign of the past.

When watching My Architect I found that everyone on screen, both past and present, has what Barthes calls “the defeat of Time in them” (CL 96). When Kahn sets out to interview his father’s contemporaries he does so with the knowledge that many are elderly – “I would never get the chance to meet them if I didn’t do it now”,

\(^2^0\) Kahn in Pedersen, “My Architect, Myself”.
\(^2^1\) Kahn in Leiberman, “Kahn Man”, p.54.
he says. This imperative drives the film, a “gathering force” that does contribute a touch of melancholy to many of these on-screen encounters. In one particular scene, when Kahn visits Philip Johnson at his home (the famous Glass House in Connecticut) this sense of imminent decease is clearly figured by the Director. At the end of the interview, Johnson is shown walking away from the camera, his gait frail and stiff as he crosses the lawn and passes behind a large tree (Fig.6). It seems no accident that the scene is cut right there, at the exact moment of disappearance.

Barthes asserts that what “the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (CL 4). The use of archival material in My Architect works with this idea. But when Kahn approaches his living subjects, as in the example above, his film highlights another form of repetition, this time the relationship between the singularity of death and its inevitable recurrence. Although ostensibly the film represents the journey of one son coming to terms with the loss of his father, the project draws on a large community of people, each of whom have mourned Louis Kahn, each of whom have mourned and will mourn others, and each of whom will eventually pass away themselves. As an audience we are also brought into this circle, through empathy with those on screen and in remembrance, and indeed anticipation, of the losses in our own lives – both common and unique. In amongst all this “slippage between deaths” (WM 21) lies a paradox: while every death represents an end, an absolute finality, the act of commemoration, along with the anticipation of future death, results in this end being multiplied and repeated. The way that My Architect continually constructs and reconstructs its subject, so that Louis Kahn is paradoxically brought back to life and laid to rest, is a reflection of the necessary but contradictory processes through which death must be negotiated.

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22 Kahn in Murphy, “Between A Brick And A Hard Place”.
24 Johnson died in early 2005, aged 98.
Throughout the film, these repetitions – the work of mourning – are performed not only in relation to the memory of the man Louis Kahn, but also in the context of his architecture. The chronology of the buildings forms the itinerary of Kahn’s journey, thereby structuring the narrative sequence of the film and providing the scenes and locations in which he meets the various characters. As a body of work, the architecture thus becomes a series of stage sets, each functioning as a site of mourning. Kahn comments that the buildings facilitated many of his interviews, “letting people use them as a way to jog their thinking, that was when they became interesting and easier to deal with”.1 It was also important, he says, to find new ways to film the buildings.2 And so the architecture is presented in a range of views and visual styles: in isolation, imposing and monolithic; in the context of their external surroundings, where they ‘fit’ with the landscape; full of people and noise,

1 Kahn in Pedersen, “My Architect, Myself”.
2 Question and Answer session with the Director (Q.8 “Documentary filmmaking”), bonus feature on DVD version.
essentially occupied; and in extreme close-up, revealing idiosyncratic surface detail, just like the features of Louis’s face (Figs.7–10). And while it is certainly possible to see the architecture of Louis Kahn as one film reviewer describes it – “monumental” and “pregnant with loss”\(^{27}\) – it is also clear that Kahn has striven to figure the buildings in terms of life and future potential. They may well be the space of loss, indeed they might seem haunted, but at the same time they are very much alive.

Before extending these ideas into a discussion of the way *My Architect* enacts the work of mourning, combined with an analysis of Kahn’s ‘performance’ upon the set of Louis Kahn’s architecture, I would like to briefly introduce the idea of “reckoning”. This is outlined by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, the editors of *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of fourteen memorial texts by Derrida. They write:

> To reckon: that is to say, to recount, relate, or narrate, to consider, judge, or evaluate, even to estimate, enumerate, and calculate. Such a reckoning is perhaps to be expected when it comes to politics, where accounts must be given, judgments rendered, and calculations made. But when it comes to mourning, to texts of mourning, texts written after the deaths of close friends and dear colleagues, to ask for a reckoning, to ask someone not only to take recount but to take account, even to calculate, may seem indecent or at the very least lacking in taste. (*WM* 2-3)

According to Brault and Naas, to undertake a reckoning involves reconciling with a language “that is repeatable, even predictable, and that perhaps cannot help but commit what is called … a kind of ‘posthumous infidelity’ ” (*WM* 3). In other words, when one tries to “encapsulate” a life, even when trying to honour or pay tribute to that life, it is unavoidable that the deceased is thereby *reduced* – “to their accomplishments, to a series of dates and places” (*WM* 21). This is the infidelity.

And so for Derrida, the act of addressing the dead, this reckoning, heralds a set of dangers or “offences”.\(^{28}\) Remembrance requires us to take the deceased into ourselves, and despite the best of intentions, this act of incorporation always carries with it the risk of appropriating the dead for our own means. Thus Derrida locates within mourning a form of narcissism, made all the more confronting by the fact that in every death there is the forecast of our own demise. When Derrida writes of the *force* of mourning, the compelling sense of duty to faithfully represent our loved

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ones, he declares that we commit an “indecent” and at time “murderous” act. But, if to speak of the dead is an infidelity, to fail to address their passing is equally so. For Derrida this is the unbearable but necessary choice between “having to do and not do both at once, with having to correct one infidelity by the other”.

These “politics of mourning” are precisely what we observe Kahn encountering through the vehicle of his film. In the remainder of this essay, therefore, I will explore My Architect in light of Derrida’s concepts, employing this theoretical framework in order to regard the film as a form of reckoning. I will identify some of Kahn’s “offences”, consider what constitutes his “debts” and finally explore how he contends with these in a literal form of “address”.

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that My Architect is constructed as an alternative obituary – that Kahn’s film is the means by which the Director inserts his own version of events into the official story of his father’s life. As a boy Nathaniel was never publicly acknowledged as Louis Kahn’s son, despite the fact that he bears his father’s name. Presumably Kahn suffered under this form of silencing, as the opening sequence of the film attests. But in taking on this project of historical revision, Kahn inevitably perpetrates his own omissions. One expects that editing is a requisite of film production, and when the subject matter is as emotionally loaded as it is in My Architect, it must have been incredibly difficult to decide what to keep and what ought to end up on the cutting room floor. I have noted that Kahn had a quantity of archival footage with which to contend. There was also the substantial cast – Louis’s family, friends and colleagues – all of whom needed to be included. Granted these challenges, I found it surprising that Kahn’s two half-sisters are relegated to a minor role. This is for me the most conspicuous “offence” of the film.

There is a single scene in which Nathaniel meets with Sue Ann Kahn and Alexandra Tyng, poignantly shot in a house designed by Louis for another family (Sue Ann recalls asking her father why he never built a house for her). Alexandra and Sue Ann have each brought along some treasured keepsakes (a collection of postcards from Louis and a few of his trademark bow-ties) which they share with Kahn prior to discussing their respective recollections of the day of their father’s funeral. There is a distinct sense of unease between the three siblings and a slight

29 ibid. p.38.
30 ibid. p.45.
note of rivalry. Despite the eloquence of the architectural setting, the beauty of the landscape outside, and the poetically drizzling rain, there is something unsettling and dissatisfying about this scene. Why doesn’t Kahn afford his sisters the same status as everyone else interviewed for the film? Why does he seem only concerned with their shared experience (ie the funeral) and not with the role that Louis played in their respective lives? In light of the fact that they are both older (a twenty-year difference in Sue Ann’s case) and that their memories would be much clearer than his own, why does it seem that he doesn’t want to hear more from them? Given Kahn’s own experience of having been marginalized, I found this scene rather troubling – and hard not to make a feminist analysis of the self-described only son leaving little room for the voices of two mature women. Kahn’s “mission”, as film critic Keith Miller would have it, “is to redeem a lost or imagined intimacy with Louis”.\footnote{Keith Miller, “Land of our absent father”.} If this is so, perhaps Sue Ann and Alexandra’s accounts might present too much of a threat, jeopardizing the primacy of the father-son relationship that Kahn seems so determined to maintain.

Another, although maybe lesser, “offence” in the film occurs in the treatment of the archival footage of Louis’s wife Esther Kahn. Since Esther died long before the making of My Architect, Kahn was fortunate to have found an old video-taped interview which he is able to utilize. A portion of this tape shows Esther attesting to Louis’s impractical nature and his disregard for money and material possessions. By contrast, she sports substantial pieces of jewellery and is immaculately groomed. Her tone is mildly condescending, though in a good-humoured kind of way. Since we have already learned how Esther supported Lou as a student and later financed the establishment of his architectural practice, this piece of footage further implicates her as the long-suffering wife. When Kahn suddenly interrupts the video, fast-forwarding through the tape, we see him in a close-up side profile, facing Esther on the monitor screen (Fig. 11). As he stares at her image, enlarged before him, his voice-over informs us “I only saw Esther once, it was at Lou’s funeral. She looked right through me.” There is an obvious, but effective, quality in the way Kahn has created this ‘dialogue’ with Esther. It demonstrates a kind of honesty or reality about the filmmaking process, but at the same time a patent theatricality in the way it has been set up. It is because of this deliberate contrivance that I feel this scene commits a
lesser offence: Kahn, ‘face-to-face at last’, acts out a kind of childish revenge on the ‘wicked’ step-mother, which in the context seems a little more forgivable than the treatment of his sisters, who are after all as much victims of circumstance as he.  

The final “offence” is that of nostalgia. Undoubtedly Kahn suffered a significant childhood trauma with the loss of his father – a trauma that I would suggest predates Louis’s actual death, since he was already an elusive and largely absent figure for the young Nathaniel. Images of children are one of a number of motifs that inhabit My Architect, and through them Kahn seems to express a wistfulness, invoking lost innocence or perhaps yearning for the normative family structure that he never had. As the New York Times film reviewer, Stephen Holden, has observed: “Nathaniel clings to [his memories] with a boyish pathos”. And despite Kahn’s claim that it “had ceased being helpful to me to think of my father as a child thinks of his father”, he admits that his role in the film is that of “a nearly middle-aged man asking questions that a child asks”. This is a difficult line that Kahn treads (between childish innocence and adult self-consciousness) and it’s perfectly illustrated in a scene where Kahn rollerblades upon the forecourt of the Salk Institute, a majestic complex overlooking the Pacific Ocean in La Jolla, California (Fig.12). According to Miller, this sequence “was probably meant to be lyrical and emancipatory; but it looks instead like a lonely child turning cartwheels, begging to be noticed”. I agree with Miller’s assessment, and in addition, found myself irritated by the blatant sentimentality of the music Kahn overlaid on this scene – Neil Young’s Long May You Run.

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32 Again, why didn’t Khan consult Sue Ann about her mother’s point of view?  
33 Other repeated motifs include water and rain, the natural landscape, and animals – particularly birds.  
35 Kahn in Murphy, “Between A Brick And A Hard Place”.  
36 Kahn in Pedersen, “My Architect, Myself”.  
37 Miller, “Land of our absent father”.  
38 For anyone unfamiliar with the song, the lyrics begin: We’ve been through/some things together/with trunks of memories/still to come/We found things to do/in stormy weather/Long may you run.
It has been possible to label these examples "offences" because they each demonstrate how Kahn has placed a prerogative upon his emotional needs. Because it is the "son’s journey", Kahn positions himself as the primary mourner. Equally however, there are many times in the film when Kahn takes a backseat, willing to defer to figures of authority, even when they contradict or shatter the myths that he has hung on to for so long. Although fiercely proud of Louis’s accomplishments, Kahn takes many of the criticisms levelled at his father with an admirable humility.

Throughout the film Kahn continues to draw upon his own memories of his father, but at the same time we witness how the input of others expands and reconfigures his picture of Louis. The architect Richard Saul Wurman, who was a student of Louis’s, recalls his mentor telling him “Everything that everybody says [about me] is the truth. It’s their truth. [But] it might not be factual”. Although this comes from one of the film’s deleted scenes, it seems to me that this anecdote has been adopted by Kahn as a guiding principle. It is perhaps worth noting here that a strong current of self-deprecating humour also runs through My Architect, not particularly explicit at first, but more apparent after subsequent viewings. This humorous edge contributed to the impression that Kahn’s interpretation of events is not the only one permitted or indeed represented, and acted as a reminder of Louis Kahn’s unusual multiple existence.

Kahn therefore attempts to balance two impulses in his film: on the one hand, to tell his own story, and on the other, to allow space for alternative accounts of Louis’s life. Although at times conflicting, these imperatives are not mutually exclusive. And more importantly, what these two trajectories indicate is that whenever we participate in dialogues about, ‘for’ and even ‘with’ the dead, it is necessary to recognize that whatever is said “remains hopelessly in us or between us, the living”:

What are we doing when we exchange these discourses [of mourning]? ... Are we trying to put things in order, make amends, or settle our accounts, to finish unfinished business? With the other? With the others outside and inside ourselves? How many voices intersect, observe, and correct one another, argue with one another, passionately embrace or pass by one another in silence? ... Or are we going to make the dead our ally (“the dead with me”), to take him by our side, or even inside ourselves, to show off some secret

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39 Available as a bonus feature on the DVD version.
Kahn’s attitude at the beginning of *My Architect* suggests that he is setting out to achieve some kind of resolution to loss and mourning. When early in the film Kahn describes his journey as a “need to know”, a need to “find out”, his belief is that answers can not only be found, but once found, finished with, laid to rest. In addition, Kahn acknowledges the legacy of his father and throughout the film we can discern his earnest desire to reciprocate this gift of death, to repay a certain sort of debt – “He left me with this fabulous story to tell, and without that sense of mystery about him, I’d never had the chance to do so much”. However, the way that Kahn “reckons” with this debt is, I think, an unwitting demonstration of the conceptual dilemma put forward by Derrida – the notion of the address, “To whom and for whom?”

In the epigraph I selected for this paper (*The act of mourning ... becomes a continued way of ‘speaking to’ the other who is gone...*), Judith Butler gets straight to the point of Derrida’s musings:

> These thoughts are for him ... I would like to dedicate these thoughts to him, give them to him, and destine them for him. Yet they will no longer reach him ... [he] himself is no longer there. We must hold fast to this evidence, to its excessive clarity...  

Butler not only reiterates the inherent paradox in our urge to ‘speak’ to the absent other, but reminds us that mourning is constituted by an act. And this act is, importantly, ongoing and unresolvable. Hence we can speak of mourning as work, despite the fact that mourning never really works.

In a scene towards the end of the film Kahn’s performance reads as a literal enactment of these themes. Here, his voice-over narration shifts in tone, as he is no longer addressing the audience but instead, directly “speaking to” his father. The sequence begins with Louis’s face filling the screen, his eyes peering intensely through the thick lenses of his glasses. The camera zooms out to reveal that this is a piece of footage from the 1960s, Louis surrounded by a group of university students.

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42 Kahn quoted in “Tell me about my father” (author unacknowledged), *The Guardian* 25 July 2004 <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1268525,00.html> [09/09/05].
43 Derrida, *The Deaths of Roland Barthes*, p.35.
44 ibid. Original emphasis.
and colleagues. He is almost motionless, sitting on a bench, looking directly into the camera, his expression composed in a calm but self-conscious manner. Kahn, in a tone of wounded disbelief, asks: “What were you thinking, Lou?” At this point, the film cuts to an exterior view of The Exeter Academy Library in New Hampshire and Kahn continues to speak: “I’ve been to most of your buildings now. India and Bangladesh will be the last. I like your Exeter library. It looks a lot like the factory buildings you walked by as a little boy in Philadelphia.” Then the view shifts to the library interior as he remarks, “But nobody expects what you did inside.” A number of different shots of the building follow until we see Kahn, filmed from above, gazing into the dramatic ceiling void, some four or five floors up: “I always believed that in the end you’d chosen my mother and me. That was the myth I lived on. But you didn’t really choose any of us – did you?” The scene ends with the camera imitating Kahn’s gaze, sweeping upwards into the cathedral-like space overhead, where a large X-shaped buttress is backlit by high windows (Figs. 13 & 14). The string score fades out to the sound of solemn bells chiming.

When Kahn enacts the work of mourning in this scene, he also clearly illustrates its unresolvable nature. The fact that in one small sequence he can bring into play such a mixture of emotion – hurt and betrayal, insight and admiration, and an abiding sense of loss – indicates how difficult it is to finish with mourning. Kahn’s question, his “did you?”, is necessarily rhetorical, not just because it will always remain unanswered, but because for Kahn it will probably always have to be asked. And this idea that the work of mourning is never completed holds true in My Architect, whether we regard the film itself – the representation of loss – or Kahn’s personal journey – the enactment of that loss.

Throughout this enactment of loss, Kahn’s film makes explicit the site of mourning. Kahn is not concerned with either the actuality or the meaning of his father’s death, but rather the site from which this death affects the living. That the subject of this documentary happens to have been an architect, provides the film with a perfect analogy for the situated nature of loss. I have discussed how Louis Kahn’s architecture operates like a stage set within the film. The architecture is however

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45 Summarizing The Work of Mourning, Sorcha Fogarty writes: “Derrida does not waste time speculating on the unintelligibility of death; instead, he locates the site from which death does affect the living, and this is the site of mourning”, (“The Work of Mourning”, Literary Encyclopedia 26 August 2004 <http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=16509> [06/01/05]). Original emphasis.
more than a mere background to the action, it is also addressed as a subject, and thereby transformed into a performer in its own right. Thus whenever Kahn addresses his father’s buildings, he is also addressing his father. And if we recall Derrida’s rhetoric of space – the “geometry of gazes”, the “orientation of perspectives” – it is never only about the visibility of Louis Kahn but also his son, who “is seen there in it” (Fig. 15).

Kahn’s journey has a dual purpose, firstly as a form of pilgrimage paying its respects to his father’s achievements, and secondly, a search seeking evidence and physical traces of the man himself. This creates a twofold structure within the film whereby the buildings of Louis Kahn come to represent both the “the corpus and the corpse”.

Furthermore, the formal and stylistic ways that the architecture is captured in *My Architect* reflects two simultaneous forms of incorporation – citation and inhabitation. Though different, they are each attempts to ‘get inside’, whether to occupy the body of work (corpus) or the mind of the man (corpse) who created it, since one has become synonymous with the other: “Through getting to know [Louis’s] buildings, I got to know him … I felt so many things about him from those buildings … And I think in finding ways to film them, it was almost as if I was relating to him, because he put himself in those buildings”.

What permits Kahn to project in this way is the idea that Louis is ‘in’ the architecture – he feels that the buildings are introjected with Louis’s presence. At the same time, by inhabiting these spaces, Kahn incorporates within himself a sense of his father. This indicates the correlation between subjectivity and space that I discussed in my first paper and it is enacted throughout *My Architect* in two ways – in terms of the buildings as a stage set and in their metonymical relation to the deceased. Metonymy, which operates by proximity or contiguity, is demonstrated in *My Architect* in the way that architecture ‘stands in’ for the deceased. This differs from the traditional metaphorical relationship of architecture and the body because for Kahn these particular buildings do more than simply represent their creator – they have become a substitute, replacing Louis in a physical, tangible way.

*My Architect* thus concludes with Kahn’s renewed sense of his father’s presence. Yet at the same time Kahn acknowledges how, paradoxically, Louis’s

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47 Question and Answer session with the Director (Q10. “More about Dhaka”), available as bonus feature on DVD version.
absence is felt even more keenly: “On this journey my father became real to me. A man, not a myth. Now that I know him a little better, I miss him more than ever”. This concurs with Brault and Naas’s observation that the “drama … is not so much that we lose the [loved one] after death but that we can no longer lose them; they who were once so distant become all too close”. Furthermore our loss, as Derrida would have it, “is within us but it is not ours; we do not have it available to us like a moment or part of our own interiority”. It is therefore impossible for this film to resolve these dilemmas – either for the son to possess his loss, or to achieve an end to the work of mourning. And this is precisely what Kahn accepts in his closing words: “I really wish things had been different. But he chose the life he wanted”. What continues to be important is the journey, the idea of taking upon the task in the first place, rising to its challenges and undergoing its process. For this reason, My Architect is never simply a work of and about mourning, but will remain always a work in mourning.

As Derrida recognized, the aesthetic capacity of a work of art to wound, to pierce, has been anesthetized by the pursuit of origins, the confidence in endings. Why shouldn’t we want to suffer the sting of loss? Isn’t that where the most profound philosophical questioning comes from?

49 Derrida, The Deaths of Roland Barthes, p.44.
Bibliography

Film


Books


Journal Articles


Electronic Sources


Appendix

MY ARCHITECT: A SON’S JOURNEY

A feature length documentary by National Kahn, the son of the 20th century architect Louis I. Kahn (dec. 1974), with a strong interactive structure, premised around the Director’s quest for knowledge. This journey is carried over a four year period during which Kahn visits his father’s remote, visually and architecturallyLarry, friends and former students. The film’s opening presents (as described in the first pages of my essay) is followed by a formal structure of ten ‘chapters’; the title of each introduced on a black screen.

1. Beginning

National Kahn travels to Connecticut to interview architect Philip Johnson. He visits Yale University and Louis Kahn’s first and last major American buildings, the Yale University Art Gallery (1954-55) and the Yale Center for British Art (completed after his death). We interview Virgil Smith, a legendary art student.

2. Kahn interviews his childhood teacher, Dan Tarnoff, recalls early memories of his father’s brief visits, and emphasizes the three paternal relationships established by Louis Kahn: Esther and the Kahn family; Anne and Alexander Yang; Harriet Buss and Tarnoff.

3. Looking for Philadelphia

Kahn surveys Philadelphia for locations where his father built. He talks to taxi drivers on the streets of the city in search of Louis Kahn’s last buildings. We visit the drawn-up building that became his architectural masterpiece. We see aerial footage of Louis in his studio and in the city.


He meets Jewish relatives and explores fragments of Kahn family history.

5. Ending

Kahn interviewed (by) Michael M. Parry.

The documentary brings the story to a close. The SFI Institute for Urban Studies, a joint project of MacGillivray Freeman Films and MacCollaboration.

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**Film Synopsis**

*MY ARCHITECT: A SON’S JOURNEY*

A feature-length documentary by Nathaniel Kahn, the son of the American twentieth century architect Louis I. Kahn (dec. 1974), with a strong narrative structure, premised around the Director’s quest for knowledge. This journey is enacted over a five year period during which Kahn visits his father’s major works and interviews family, friends and former colleagues. The film’s opening prelude (as described in the first pages of my essay) is followed by a formal structure of ten ‘chapters’, the title of each introduced on a black screen:

- **Beginnings…**
  
  Nathaniel Kahn travels to Connecticut to interview architect Philip Johnson. He visits Yale University to see Louis Kahn’s first and last major American buildings, the Yale University Art Gallery (1951-53) and The Yale Center for British Art (completed after his death). He interviews Vincent Scully, Professor of Art History.
  
  Kahn introduces his childhood home in Pennsylvania, recalls early memories of his father’s brief visits, and explains the three familial relationships maintained by Louis Kahn: Esther and Sue Ann Kahn; Anne and Alexandra Tyng; Harriet Pattison and Nathaniel.

- **Looking in Philadelphia**
  
  Kahn combs Philadelphia for evidence of his father, he talks to taxi drivers on the streets of the city in which Louis Kahn lived and visits the downtown building which housed his architectural practice. We see archival footage of Louis in his office and in the city.
  
  Kahn visits the Richards Medical Towers (1957-62) at the University of Pennsylvania.
  
  He meets Jewish relatives and uncovers fragments of Kahn family history.

- **Heading West**
  
  Kahn interviews architect I. M. Pei. He flies to California to see The Salk Institute of Biological Studies, La Jolla (1959-67), where he talks to Louis’s colleague Jack MacCallister.
  
  In Los Angeles, he follows an obscure lead from a man who claims to have been a witness at the scene of Louis’s death.

- **The Immigrant**
  
  We learn of Louis’s childhood, his family’s immigration to the United States and their extreme poverty. Back in Philadelphia, Kahn visits the ruins of the tenement building where the family lived and the school, now boarded up, that his father attended. Kahn briefly outlines Louis’s university education, his
marriage to Esther Israeli and the early years of his struggling architectural career.

We meet Anne Tyng, who worked with Louis as a young architect. She discusses their relationship and the birth of their daughter, Alex. She travels with Kahn to view the Trenton Bath House, New Jersey (1954-59), a project on which she collaborated with Louis.

❖ Dreams of a Better City

In a confrontational interview with Edmund Bacon, Kahn reveals an old dispute between his father and the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, the result of which is “not a single shred” of Lou’s influence in downtown Philadelphia.

We see archival footage of Louis teaching a Master Class at Pennsylvania University in the 1960s.

Kahn interviews architect Richard Saul Wurman about the prejudices and failures his father suffered.

Kahn visits Frank Gehry.

❖ Going to Sea

In this section, Kahn visits The American Wind Symphony Barge (1960-61) an eccentric vessel designed by Louis for Robert Boudreau, who is both the ship’s captain and the conductor of the orchestra.

Kahn introduces his mother, landscape architect Harriet Pattison, who discusses her relationship with Louis.

❖ The Truth about the Bastard

Kahn travels to Maine to talk with his mother’s close friends and relatives about Lou’s affair with Harriet, and about the circumstances of his birth in 1962.

Next he visits the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, (1967-72). This sequence includes archival footage of the museum’s construction and an interview with three of the engineers who worked on the project.

Kahn interviews architect Robert A. M. Stern.

We see sketches and maquettes from the many projects that Louis was never able to build.

❖ The Nomad

Travelling to Israel, Kahn meets with Jerusalem’s former mayor, Teddy Kollek, who worked with Louis for seven years on the unrealized reconstruction of the Hurva Synagogue. Kahn films the ruins of the old synagogue and chats with young Jewish soldiers on the street. A computerized 3D model of the synagogue design follows.

A conversation with architect Moshe Safdie takes place in the desert outside Jerusalem.

Kahn ‘addresses’ Esther Kahn (dec.) via archival footage.
Family Matters

Kahn meets with his two half-sisters in a house designed by Louis for Norman and Doris Fisher, Hatboro, Pennsylvania. They discuss memories of their father and share a few keepsakes.

Kahn goes to New Hampshire to film the Phillips Exeter Academy Library (1967-72).

He returns to Maine, where his mother now lives, to talk further with her about her feelings for Lou.

Louis’s former colleague Duncan Buell and personal assistant Kathy Condé talk to Kahn in his father’s old office in Philadelphia.

The End of the Journey

In order to see Louis’s last major works, Kahn again travels overseas.

At the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India (1962-74) he interviews architect B. V. Doshi.

Kahn makes a pilgrimage to the Capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka (1962-82), where he films the complex of parliament buildings and some of the many people who occupy them. He talks to workers on the forecourts and has a conversation with architect Shamsul Wares, inside the central atrium.

The film concludes with the workers’ daily call to prayer, and fades out to Kahn’s final reflections upon his journey.

My Architect employs a range of filmic devices, knitting together disparate qualities of vision and sound. Interviews shot in various locations alternate with dramatic and formally composed scenes of architecture and the landscape. These are frequently interspersed with short scenes of street life, along with animals (typically birds), captured fleetingly, often in a hand-held camera style. Additionally, Kahn’s footage is interwoven with archival material, including motion picture, recorded sound, photographs, drawings, plans and models. Kahn is always present in the film, whether on screen as his own character or ‘player’, or behind the camera, or as the narrator and ‘travel guide’.

The film is accompanied by an original score, composed by Joseph Vitarelli. The soundtrack includes incidental music such as Neil Young’s Long May You Run, Copland’s Fanfare for the Common Man, a section of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, a traditional Hebrew hymn Hayom T’Amtzeinu, and a Muslim call to prayer.
ARCHITECTURE AS METAPHOR
Late 20thC critical theory frequently relies on language common to architecture and notions of “building” – structure, construction, framework, boundary, space, practice. There is also an historical tradition of subjectivity as dwelling; memory as housed (eg memory palace).

The film is a construction and reconstruction of the father/architect whereby the solidity and “timelessness” of the architecture stands in contrast to the instability, uncertainty and contested nature of the emotional relationships.

“The big design problem is not architecture, it’s your life”. ⁵¹

THE SPACE OF LOSS
One of the ways Nathaniel Kahn goes in search of his father is through his buildings, as if looking for traces of the man in the architecture. But he is also interested in the present life of the buildings – who uses them, how they use them, what they think of them. The broader legacy of Louis Kahn, his impact beyond his family and friends.

Footage of the buildings shifts back and forth between empty and occupied, grandly contemplative yet also everyday. This parallels NK’s experience of his father – always there and not-there, pervasive but elusive.

CONJURING AND RECKONING WITH THE DEAD
Loss can be experienced as a kind of haunting, and there is a sense that for his entire life Nathaniel Kahn has had to contend with his father’s absence (even when he was alive, he was rarely present). Is the film an effort to bring him back to life? to put him to rest? to do both?

NK says: “Unlike any other medium … film literally allows you to have a scene in which you are talking to someone who’s dead … and on the screen you are both equally ‘alive’. ” ⁵²

“The drama … is not so much that we lose the [loved one] after death but that we can no longer lose them; they who were once so distant become all too close”. ⁵³

THE WORK OF MOURNING/THE WORK IN MOURNING
The film is a vehicle through which NK enacts a process of mourning. Thus the film itself becomes a work “in” mourning.

Transference of mourning onto the audience – it is certainly an emotive film, and watching it, we might shed a tear or two. Why does NK want to share his grief with

us? what do we gain from this sharing? do we willingly participate? or resist? and if we do, then why – out of empathy, a sense of universality, mere curiosity, morbidity?

MY ARCHITECT, MY SELF
In Nathaniel’s search to discover his father he is also searching for, and seeks to assert, own his own identity.

The documentary begins with Louis Kahn’s obituary, which does not acknowledge Nathaniel nor any other members of LK’s extended, “illegitimate” family. Thus the remainder of the film reads in answer to this omission – Nathaniel literally embodies “the return of the repressed”, he “outs” his father’s secrets in order to insert himself into the story from which he has previously been excluded.54

The film sets up Nathaniel’s claim to his father and his position in the official history, but at the same time it establishes NK’s independent identity and reputation as filmmaker. While NK rewrites his father’s story he produces his own.

Does NK assert “ownership” over the story of Louis Kahn? Or does the interview structure and the trope of “uncovering/discovering” acknowledge the multiple versions of the man? LK is quoted as having said: “Everything that everybody ever says [about me] is the truth – it’s their truth. [But] it might not be factual.”55

PERFORMING AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Nathaniel Kahn has been applauded for his ingenuous and fearless approach. He has also been criticized for conducting his interviews as personal confrontations, of relentlessly picking at old wounds, and for the melodramatic use of music.

So is the film narcissistic or necessarily candid? Honest or too self-conscious? Is every confrontation a self-confrontation?

[Nathaniel Kahn] is a constant presence in the film; interviewing his father’s old clients, colleagues and sparring partners, narrating the voice-over, acting as the viewer’s ambassador during the sequences which explore the buildings themselves. His feelings for his father are ambiguous but powerful, and never far from the surface. His mission is to redeem a lost or imaginary intimacy with Louis. He remembers him lovingly but feels terribly betrayed by him. He approaches the work with pride, but also in a strange spirit of rivalry.

This raw yearning can be uncomfortable. In some sequences it becomes clear that Nathaniel Kahn has withheld his identity from his interviewees, who duly expatiate on the minor foibles of great men, before realizing they’re being filmed by the son of one of them. Conversations with other members of this most non-nuclear of families are taut and unstable, as when Nathaniel meets his half-sisters in a family house built for someone else, or [in the conversations with his mother]. The human part of the story even inflects on the immaculately shot architectural footage. Monumentality carries with it the notion of the tomb; Kahn’s grave buildings seem pregnant with loss. One sequence where Nathaniel rollerblades around the neo-Palladian void at the centre of his father’s exquisite Salk Institute was probably meant to be lyrical and emancipatory; but it looks instead like a lonely child turning cartwheels, begging to be noticed.56

54 Rhonda Lieberman. p53.
55 Recollection of Richard Saul Wurman, deleted scene from My Architect.