OFF! De-Centering Feminist Architectural History

Thomas Moser
Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber
Harald R. Stühlinger
(Eds.)

TU Wien
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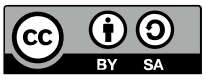

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De-Centering
A Preface to OFF!

Irene Nierhaus

The canon is regularly described as the center of architectural knowledge. Through the constant repetition of this assertion, it has transformed and continues to transform from a specific socio-historical order into one assumed to be natural. In this order strident tones of individualized mastery, creativity, assertiveness and of autonomy and innovation still resound. Multiple attributions produce gender-related inclusions and exclusions. They not only regulate work monographs and authorship narratives but are also used to structure different worlds of imagination. This has an impact on many areas, ranging from public debates about buildings to consumer advertising images or feature films. A kind of mythical latency forms in depictions of and narratives about the Promethean builder, the visionary designer, or muscle-bound assertiveness.

Despite decades of gender-critical objections, queer-feminist and decolonizing critique, which has been accompanied by an opening up of the discourses and practices as well as a shift in analytical perspectives, it is still patriarchal potency rather than polyphonic potentiality that determines what is hegemonic and exclusively canonical. Nevertheless, due to the ever-stronger presence of women architects and through their designs, buildings, writing and teaching work as well as their social and political positions, this structure is being eroded here and there. The issue is not just the hard-fought exceptions or the quasi-miraculous borderline phenomena of famous individual women architects but rather the social reality in various, geographically scattered, socially expansive and culturally diverse worlds.

Consequently, the concern of this book is an OFF! Not remaining rigidly frozen in the blinkered views and patterns of the canon but rather engaging in a de-centering that reflects the plurality and variability of the thinking and work of women architects, architectural historians, and theorists. In this way the canon can be rewritten to become polyfocal architectural knowledge, a wide range of knowledge held by the many, by a variety of different participants and protagonists, which is revealed in their work and ways of working. In the book this is shown particularly clearly in the chapters on writing, agency, collective practices and on what is happening outside the Western focus, which through the selected biographies of 26 women architects from many different countries, among them Ethiopia, Slovenia, Columbia, Poland, India, Czech Republic or Australia, was transformed into the OFF! project. These stories are repeatedly surprising and amazing, they offer insights – some bitter, others encouraging – into the complexity and the possibilities, the diverse ideas and practices of women architects and illustrate how, as planners, builders, and writers, they sustainably design their world, their environment.

In the contributions questions repeatedly surface about the “how” of women architects’ history, their ways of thinking, narratives and forms of writing, i. e. questions about de-centering as work in the areas of knowledge and knowledge politics and also about the positioning in the area spanning between the dominant patterns and the self-configuring reflections of OFF. The canon is such a powerful structure and apparatus of the imagination that abandoning it is not easy; to achieve this a reflective understanding of self, critical re-readings and collective and inclusive procedures and themes are required in order not only to widen it as compensation, but also to destabilize, infiltrate and deviously circumvent it, i. e. to unlearn it. This book shows how cultural and social relationality and allowing discourses to migrate can offer hitherto unsuspected insights and the discovery of new worlds. This includes the aspect of caring, as illustrated by participative practices or by the combination of profession, care work and motherhood. Care is seen as a relationship based on mutual dependence, social and cultural ecology in a society of interconnected beings. This understanding runs contrary to the canon and consequently, as culture theorist Elke Krasny has shown, has been detached from Western hegemonic thinking about architecture.

De-centering also means decolonizing. Decolonizing affects colonialisms and colonialization that takes the form of ideologization and dominant regimes of thought and is expressed by sets of social rules together with their racist, sexist, and classical production of difference and their historical patterns of representation, which are also found in building and writing. Decolonizing in the sense used by literature scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Who in fact speaks? Against the background of occidental philosophy's self-absorbed nature, its universalizing values, and its idealized forms that seem to be without shadow, Spivak has addressed the relationship between permission to speak and speechlessness. This directly affects the traditional history and theory of architecture, which is not just "passively forgetful" but, as art historian Griselda Pollock has shown in the field of art history, actively engages in exclusion through its discursive formation. In the transition to the disciplinary "superstructure" of history real active women architects and artists have been and still are being erased. That is to say, historiography exacerbates exclusion and makes it into a fixed rule and law. Who speaks, writes, and publishes about whom and about what? Which authorship patterns are used by the writers and by those portrayed? What is needed is the decolonization of writing, serious reflection on epistemically controlled and disciplined classification and identification processes with the aim of making other cognitive politics of hitherto negated and ignored knowledge visible and thus enabling them to become history or stories. In the book this is undertaken by, for instance, re-telling architecture, by collaborative strategies and collective methods of production. This book is a critical and optimistic treasure trove of approaches, ideas, and realizations. Spaces of such a kind are needed for various feminisms, queer politics, and women's movements whose differences, rather than being homogenized, are perceived, therefore allowing the plasticity of the OFF.

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