

# **Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture**

*Lisa Robertson*

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**Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture** Lisa Robertson  
from clearcutpress.com:

Poet and essayist Lisa Robertson has maintained the Office for Soft Architecture since 1996 as an apparatus for lyrical research focused primarily on Vancouver, B.C., with some excursions to other places. The Office constructs propositions and documents for the advancement of a natural history of civic surface. Three books of Robertson's poetry have been published: XEclogue (Tsunami Editions, 1993, reissued by New Star, 1999) Debbie: An Epic (1997, nominated for the Governor General's Award for Poetry) and The Weather (2001) (both co-published by New Star in Canada and Reality Street in the U.K.). Her prose has appeared in Cabinet, Front, Jacket, Mix, Collapse, Nest magazine, and many art catalogs and monographs.

## Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture Details

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# From Reader Review Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture for online ebook

## Patrick Bella Gone says

Lisa Robertson fills the book's early essays with short declarations: "Description is mystical." "Nothing is utopian. Everything wants to be." "Belief is difficult." In a book built around the gulf between utopia and reality, between documentation and disappointment, Robertson utilizes abstract nouns as the subjects of sentences. "Anger" and "Hope" are given actions to carry out, and are often coupled with bland adjectives ("imprecise dusk," "upholstered anonymity"), an extra glaze of corporate melancholy. In the following catalog (another device Robertson's fond of), notice how each general noun is clarified and tweaked: "The suburb is a received idea, a quoted stupidity, a commonplace cliché, a spatial impostor, an idle machine." These pairings reflect the alienation Robertson feels as she writes about Vancouver. Occasional Work is setting-based. She says "The suburb is a child's Versailles," yet the adult Versailles is nonexistent. "Our fountains would possess pathos," ideally, but Robertson navigates the gap between the intentions of public space and actual results. She observes New Brighton Park, a grassy area with industrial structural holdovers still in plain view. I thought of Joni Mitchell's lyric: "Pave paradise, put up a parking lot," but what happened in New Brighton Park is the city paradised back over the parking lot, making it a place to picnic "with fluent obliviousness." This is trying, but it's also concealing.

In Occasional Work, but especially in the Seven Walks section, Robertson employs "we" as her primary narrative agent: "We're dumped into these sketched spaces by whatever," "Were we inside or outside the diorama?" She takes focus off of herself as an individual with particular proclivities, and makes these walks a stage for a collective biography, similar to Ashbery's modis operandi. Her mind becomes "our mind." But Robertson isn't speaking for all humanity or some similar shlock. She's interested in how "the lyric class" moves through the urban, each day proceeding "with its humiliating diligence," how we walk in a park, then grab a bite to eat, then spill out into the night, each of these bourgeois mundanities becoming events for scrupulous analysis and metaphor, how we deal with each other as if we were "not amorous colleagues but weird sockets of uncertain depth," how we steer "our asinine hopes...as if this is our freedom."

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## Joe says

My conversation w/Nikkita in the comments sums things up pretty well:

Nikkita How are you liking this one? I come back to it again and again.  
Jun 06, 2011 07:19pm • delete

Joe Hall Hey Nikkita--The grandmother in me lvd, loved the pieces on the strawberry farm and the ontology (not sure if I'm using this right but I figure what the hell) of the blackberry. Really anything that had hard research blew me away. Persistent sleepyness kept me from following some of the more free wheeling bits and I do think she is guilty (as charged in the comments section of SOME pseudo nonsense. But, either way, I already know I'm going to come back to it. And have scratched some phrases into my notebook/brain. Would you recommend anything else in this vein?(less)

Nikkita I like it mostly for raw matter and phrases, and the idea of reading space as a text--can certainly see the tendency toward pseudo nonsense in some places.

Can't think of anything quite akin to this to recommend, but I wish!(less)

Joe Hall Oh yeah. There's a lot of good raw matter.

eg

On the Victorian Estate Garden (as majestic landscape): "They erased the geometrical symmetries of parterres and the visual obstruction of fences, and sometimes even villages, to construct for the huge country estates of the gentry an image of a benign mythic utopia....In compositional terms, William Kent elided the boundary between the garden as an enclosed space and the surrounding landscape, extending the designed vista to the horizon. The visual impression was of unbroken expanse, the vista replicating the unbroken power of aristocratic ownership (86)

Gardens can receive the stamp of fashion somewhat more economically and therefore more frequently than the relatively immovable, and culturally monumental, structures of architecture. (87)

When structure is increasingly expressed through sociality and use, rather than solely through materials, dwelling plays out an ephemeral architectural practice. (96)

Robertson charts movement of garden from landed gentry to middle-class. As well as a disarticulation of the boundaries between house and garden as gardens come to mirror the social spaces of the house – 'rendering these two spaces as interchangeable social sites. "Lifestyle" spilled across the opened structures of the home; lifestyle was the newest recreation." Though she is curiously ambivalent about what this means. Or the implications of this opened structure...Aside from the fact that the exterior becomes more open to judgment of lifestyle (now that its what it signifies, now that garden is an excretion of the house and the order of the house).

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## **Matt says**

This collection of essays is a little odd--the bulk of the book is taken up with the "occasional work," which at least read like catalog essays for art shows that deal, at least tangentially, with architecture. So, pictures of fountains or estates or the furnishings of turn of the century French apartments. Robertson's focus, she tells us early on, is the way money makes boundaries soft, so the way that money manifests in successive layers of intention and revision and process. But really, when you read these, what you find is a lively intelligence poking around at some really striking cultural artifacts. It's hard to explain, but sometimes you get long, didactic, and scholarly, like an essay on the role strawberries played in England in Austen's time (to shed light, indirectly, on *Sense and Sensibility*, IIRC). Others are shorter, more lyrical and occasionally gnomic. The best, of course, inhabit a middle ground, so I particularly liked an essay on Vancouver's mixed history with decorative fountains and water features, and there's a strong essay as well on blackberries, which is maybe the diminishing echo of the longer piece on strawberries. That section of the book ends with a strange essay on shopping at Value Village, which has made its way all the way here to Missouri, which might equally trouble and delight Robertson.

The seven walks are actually a long single essay, and more narrative than most of what comes before, as the speaker and a companion she calls the guide take a day walking together and have encounters in an urban environment. I found this one maybe a little too diffuse for me, too many flares off the edges of language. I

liked its peripatetic commitment, but I couldn't really follow it where I think it was leading me.

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## **mwpm says**

Interesting collection of *Robertsobilia*. Bits and pieces, mostly prepared for magazines. Including a manifesto on "Soft Architecture", a theory on "Spatial Synthetics", a brief account of the idea of the "Shack", and an introduction to Robertson's own book, *The Weather* ...

We think of the design and construction of weather description as important decorative work. What shall our new ornament be? How should we adorn mortality now? This is a serious question. Sincerity's eroticism is different from wit's. The narcotic and the cosmetic each distribute a space. They sculpt what rhythmized peace could be. Within that chiaroscuro we need to gently augment the fraught happiness of our temporary commons by insisting on utopian delusion as a passage - like a wet pergola or a triumphal arch against blue. The days ever and again are godlets swagging our bliss and ignorance and adjustments in economy. We would, with ultra-enriched and devoted femininity, decorate for them. The day is out house. Words are fleshy ducts. Description decorates. As for us, we like a touch of kitsch in each room to juice up or pinken the clean lines of the possible. This decor received futurity as its own ludic production; this weather is the vestibule to something fountaining newly and crucially and yet indiscernibly beyond. Perhaps here we shall be other than the administrators of poverty. Consider that we need to drink deeply from convention under faithful lighthearted circumstances in order to integrate the weather, boredom utopic, with waking life. By 'integrate' we mean: to arc into a space without surface as if it were an inhabitable, flickering event. And by 'convention' we refer to our immodest infiltration of the long citations of grooming, intimacy, and prognostication. Like flags or vanes, we signify an incommensurability. No elegance is self-sufficient. No one is old enough to die or to love. The weather is a stretchy, elaborate, delicate trapeze, an abstract and intact conveyance to the genuine future, which is also now. Mount its silky rope in ancient makeup and polished muscle to know the idea of tempo as real. But the history of the atmosphere is recklessly slow. Recall the peculiar feeling of lassitude before a storm. This is what makes 1 a.m., 4 a.m., 5:15 a.m.: Dear Reader - A lady speaking to you from the motion of her own mind is always multiple. Enough of the least. We want to be believed.

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## **Elizabeth Metzger says**

A sampling:

Europe's lusty godlets start bending.

We arrive at our long century.

What if there is no space only a permanent, slow-motion mystic takeover, an implausibly careening awning? Nothing is utopian. Everything wants to be. Soft architects face the reaching middle.

(hell fucking yeah.)

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### **Evelyn says**

This book is great if you are interested in Lisa Robertson, but I wouldn't recommend it to someone who is new to her work. The discourse and thought behind this book is amazing. Is it fun to read? Not always. But, it will make you think critically about society and about the work and those works connected to it.

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### **Jac says**

This book is an amazingly odd hybrid of poetry and witness-bearing to an evolving Vancouver. While there are more literal pieces which look into subjects like a new variety of vine attaching itself to buildings or the interiors of Atget, there are also these terrific, almost metaphysical ruminations on scaffolding and fountains. Then there are the walks in the end, which were my favorites. They are less guided architectural tours than they are auras of words for the structure of moments in time. (Yeah, I said it, and I'm not taking it back.)

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### **Carrie Lorig says**

does your theory have imagination? mine does.

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### **Rosalind Grush says**

a modern day balzac, for whatever that's worth.

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### **Melissa says**

Love. This book makes the sentence an event. And it makes living, the mundane items of life (the suburban home, the city park, corporate fountains, used clothing) feel ripe with metaphor, thought, challenge, secrets. Really, this book makes the world so much more interesting.

"Nothing is utopian. Everything wants to be. . . . The truly utopian act is to manifest current conditions and dialects. Practice description. Description is mystical."

And this such a lovely little edition, which I hear is out of print.

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### **Hanna says**

This is literally the worst book I have ever read. She tries, for pages upon pages, to overly poeticize and theorize public spaces in unnecessarily (and I mean, just stupidly) dense language and shitty metaphors that try so hard to be original and/or deep and/or sentimental that this whole text comes off sounding like

something an ostentatious high-schooler would pen. I hate that I spent money on this pretentious, banal, senseless drivel.

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### **Marije de Wit says**

Lisa Robertson has the ability to undress notions from the meaning we've fixated them in, serve them anew with interpretations that are more peculiar and therefore unexpected, and touch their core with a refreshed understanding. The way she bridges the gap between intimate experience and universal knowledge is remarkable and admirable. In her poetry the philosophical and the very down-to-earth everyday life also meet to revive our awareness of our involvement in our surroundings, but I'm looking forward to more of her essays where her descriptions refreshingly pierce the mundane. Reading this particular 1996-book is a reminder that it is still, if not more than ever necessary to rethink our relationship to our built environment. According to the introduction, "The Office for Soft Architecture came into being as [Robertson] watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in the fluid called money." Now that Capital has come to determine every aspect of city life, this collection of essays can encourage us to realign our inner life with the surfaces outside of ourselves, even if only imaginary, and reassure us that it matters.

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### **Keith says**

I hated this so much it drained my ability to write a snarky Goodreads review about it. So I'll quote it instead.

"The days ever and again are godlets, swagging our bliss and ignorance and adjustments in economy."

GODLETS. FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST, *GODLETS*. FOR 200 FUCKING PAGES.

I have this idea where I'd grab an excerpt from this book and lay it side-by-side with Steve Martin's humor essays on shitty writing, and no one would be able to tell them apart.

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### **Kristi says**

The reflection in this book doesn't happen through a meditative stillness. In fact, stillness here is always paired with a pace. It's the stillness of being on something that's not still, but being still on this moving thing. The reflection comes when the dark-something aligns momentarily with the reflective surface. Subway passing a pillar. Eyes latched to the possibility of seeing the glimpse again.

"I want an intelligence that's tall and silver." I find my eyes chasing backwards -- *hey, wait a minute, me, too!*

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### **Dan says**

Possibly my favorite book of this century.

