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CATHERINE INGRAHAM, *ARCHITECTURE'S THEORY*,  
MIT PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, MASS., 2023.

The *Writing Architecture Series* of the MIT Press has recently extended its list of publications with the book *Architecture's Theory*, authored by Catherine Ingraham. The book's seemingly general title appears at first to come from the thematic diversity of the twelve essays collected in it. However, the title cannot be considered general. The author's decision not to use the common term "architectural theory," but *architecture's* instead, is a subtle intervention that epitomizes a specific relationship of architecture to theory questioned throughout the book. This relationship is that of *property*, which introduces the idea of theory that is "architecture's own."

Ingraham addresses the issue of property (and also propriety) multiple times in the book. In the sixth chapter,<sup>1</sup> which strongly echoes Jacques Derrida's critique of *the proper name*, we find an illustrative definition of the architect's work: instead of practically using what is given, immediate, or at hand, the architect "imports materials from elsewhere."<sup>2</sup> This, according to Ingraham, constitutes architecture's status of epistemic plurality. The discipline of architecture institutes itself through the act of importation and, consequently, *appropriation* of what is always outside it. To appropriate, in this regard, implies structuring that cannot but be considered simultaneously and doubly as a matter of property/propriety.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is titled "This Earth Has Lines upon Its Face." Quoting the ethnologist Robert Ferris Thompson, Ingraham explains that the title is the literal translation of "This country has become civilized" from Yoruba. She uses this association of lines with civilization in Yoruba culture to introduce the issue of linearity as the structuring principle. C. Ingraham, "This Earth Has Lines upon Its Face," *Architecture's Theory*, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

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What the architect brings from elsewhere must be made proper,<sup>3</sup> which means to be put in order of what Ingraham calls architectural precedents. The discourse of the proper thus represents the epistemological ordering as “the entire engagement of architecture with its own disciplinary history and proprietorial structure.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that the need to say “architecture’s,” in this sense, indicates a particular resistance to the state of instability caused by the rupture of the unknown brought “from elsewhere.” As a response to such a crisis, appropriation represents the (re)construction of the (architecture’s) self, or more precisely, its *line* of development.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of linearity holds an important place in the book, as well as in Ingraham’s work in general. Her frequent phrase “burdens of linearity”<sup>6</sup> refers to the problem of reduction to which linearity as a system of thought leads. Its idealizing principle, she argues, imposes the constraints of the Cartesian *cogito*, making one give in to the “desire for ‘passage to the limit’.”<sup>7</sup> The “burdens” of linearity are, in that sense, the burdens of the dream about the pure, the proper, and the autonomous.

It is interesting that the book’s last chapter begins with a quote from Le Corbusier, in which he juxtaposes his Modulor and the image of the donkey – the *purist* idea of the most proper and the figure of the animal as the absolute improper. This juxtaposition seems to introduce an alternative or at least a different reading of linearity. Namely, the position *between* the perfect and the accidental makes the line in some way drawn into the dialectic of these two extremes. Within that dialectic, the discourse about linearity takes the form of a qualitative polemic between the straight and the curved line, the proper and the improper, the Modulor and the donkey, the human and the animal.<sup>8</sup> Referring to the impossibility of absolute propriety, Ingraham asks at one point: “Does Le Corbusier really mean ‘relatively straight lines’?”<sup>9</sup> The meaning of

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, for example, links the word *proper* with both the Latin *prope* and *proprius*, where the former introduces the idea of proximity, while the latter directly refers to the meaning of property, “own-ness,” and “self-proximity.” J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Chakravorty Spivak, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore / London, 1997, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> C. Ingraham, “‘This Earth Has Lines upon Its Face,’” p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*, Yale University Press, New Haven / London, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> C. Ingraham, “The Donkey’s Way,” *Architecture’s Theory*, p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> See C. Ingraham, *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition*, Routledge, London, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> C. Ingraham, “The Donkey’s Way,” *Architecture’s Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2023, p. 191.

the “relatively straight,” – that is, *approximately* straight – refers to the condition of the line being deprived of its ordering power. Ingraham theorizes this condition of the line’s movement between exactitude and inexactness using the concept of *figural play*, defined as “a way of combining the symbolic, the real (as unstable givens), and the senses.”<sup>10</sup> The introduction of this concept points to the urge for thematizing the position “in-between,” the position in which architecture’s appropriation is a never-ending process of both institution and deconstruction of its property. In other words, the process of constantly reviving architecture by opening the possibility for the theory of its *future* own. Ingraham sees this dialectic (between self-construction and the transgression of the self) as a consequence of, on the one hand, architecture’s inability to speak for itself and, on the other, its “need for a formal and autonomous architectural object that has been properly constructed within.”<sup>11</sup> The tension between these two poles forces architecture into a figural play as the process of self-transcendence and autopoiesis. Architecture is, in that regard, defined as a constant oscillation between the search for the improper and, subsequently, its discursive structuring. That is, between the search for the beast and then its taming with lines.<sup>12</sup>

Ingraham notes that her formal education in comparative literature influenced her strategies of going into theories that were not architecture’s.<sup>13</sup> The essays in this book, quite different from one another, best document those strategies. From that multitude of topics, this review can single out only a select few, itself drawing lines through the book. The task for other readers is to look for yet more beasts in it.

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<sup>10</sup> C. Ingraham, “Creative Omnipotence: Architectural Objects,” *Architecture’s Theory*, p. 44. As she explains, the concept of figural play is a combination of Derridean play, Winnicott’s analysis of play in children, and Deleuze’s definitions of the figural in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. “It [figural play] points to paradoxical forces at work in architecture that result in the realization of a material object through a process of design and is directly related to the dialectic between concepts of originality and creativity and pressures of what is given as a precedent or rule set.” *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> C. Ingraham, “‘This Earth Has Lines upon Its Face’,” p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> “Lines and beasts occupy fundamentally different orders – the inanimate versus the animate is only the most obvious distinction.” C. Ingraham, “The Donkey’s Way,” p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> C. Ingraham, “‘This Earth Has Lines upon Its Face’,” p. 69.