May Mo(u)rn: A Site-Writing

Jane Rendell

It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text that repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity.¹

Frederic Jameson’s term ‘the political unconscious’ calls for a form of literary criticism that explores the tensions of class struggle, not through vulgar Marxism but through mediation. If the unconscious is able to play a political role in producing a reading of a literary text that brings class struggle to the surface, what are the possibilities and processes of a criticism that would allow for the political unconscious to emerge in architecture?

In this essay I suggest that architecture’s political unconscious can be explored through the site of ‘the setting’ and the practice of ‘site-writing’. In psychoanalysis, the ‘setting’ is a term used to describe the main conditions of treatment, within which the psychoanalytic encounter occurs. Following Sigmund Freud, these conditions include ‘arrangements’ about time and money, as well as ‘certain ceremonials’ governing the physical positions of analysand (lying on a couch and speaking) and analyst (sitting behind the analyst on a chair and listening).² Coined by Donald Winnicott, ‘as the sum of all the details of management that are more or less accepted by all psychoanalysts’,³ the term has been modified by other analysts. For José Bleger, for example, the setting comprises both the process of psychoanalysis, and the non-process or frame, which provides a set of constants, or limits, to the ‘behaviours’ that occur within it.⁴ In the work of André Green it is a casing or casket that holds the ‘jewel’ of the psychoanalytic process.⁵

Green has drawn attention to the setting not as a static tableau, but as a psychoanalytic apparatus; not as a representation of psychic structure, but as an expression of it. For Green the position of the consulting room between inside and outside, relates to its function as a transitional space between analyst and analysand, as does its typology as a closed space different from both inner and outer worlds:
The consulting room … is different from the outside space, and it is
different, from what we can imagine, from inner space. It has a specificity
of its own …6

In Green’s work the setting is a ‘homologue’ for what he calls the third
element in analysis, the ‘analytic object’, which is formed through the analytic
association between analyst and analysand.7

The analytic object is neither internal (to the analysand or to the analyst),
nor external (to either the one or the other), but is situated between the
two. So it corresponds precisely to Winnicott’s definition of the transitional
object and to its location in the intermediate area of potential space, the
space of ‘overlap’ demarcated by the analytic setting.8

Allowing the political unconscious to surface demands engaging with
the psychic dimension of architecture. I suggest that in order to do this
architectural criticism might operate as a kind of ‘analytic object’, located in
the area of overlap between architectural object and critic, with reference to
the setting as that which frames the provocation of transference (and counter-
transference) – the work of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has noted that Freud’s clearest account
of his method outlined in ‘Two Encyclopaedia Articles: A. Psycho-Analysis’,9
suggests that psychoanalysis takes place if two functions are linked – the
analysand’s free associations and the psychoanalyst’s evenly suspended
attentiveness.10 In ‘On Beginning the Treatment’ Freud explains how, in
including rather than excluding ‘intrusive ideas’ and ‘side-issues’, the
process of association differs from ordinary conversation.11 Bollas defines
free association as that which occurs when we think by not concentrating
on anything in particular, and where the ideas that emerge, which seem to
the conscious mind to be disconnected, are instead related by a hidden and
unconscious logic.12 In order to achieve evenly suspended attentiveness Bollas
explains that the analyst also has to surrender to his own unconscious mental
activity; s/he should not reflect on material, consciously construct ideas or
actively remember.13 Bollas connects the relation between free association and
evenly suspended attentiveness to the interaction between transference and
counter-transference.14

In Freud’s later writings, he distinguishes between construction and
interpretation as different forms of analytic technique:

‘Interpretation’ applies to something that one does to some single
element of the material, such as an association or a parapraxis. But it is a
‘construction’ when one lays before the subject of the analysis a piece of his
early history that he has forgotten …15

In this essay, I propose that when aiming to explore the unconscious of
architecture it is useful to allow psychoanalytic modes of interaction –
interpretation and construction – to inform critical strategies of engagement,
precisely because they allow us to investigate moments of early history which

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may have been covered over. But although an architectural critic may most
often put him or herself in the position of the analyst using techniques of
interpretation and construction, it is also the case that the critic occupies the
position of the analysand.

Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche is perhaps best known for his re-
examination of the points at which he argues Freud went astray. This
includes most famously Freud’s controversial abandonment of the seduction
theory, and his turn to the child’s fantasy to explain seduction, thus at some
level avoiding thinking through the complex interplay of inner and outer
worlds between the child and what Laplanche calls ‘the concrete other’.
Laplanche maintains that this early scene of seduction is of key importance
to psychoanalysis as it works to de-centre the position of the subject in its
articulation of the formation and role of the unconscious. For Laplanche, it
is the embedding of the alterity of the mother in the child, which places an
‘other’ in the subject; this other is also an other to the mother – as it involves
her unconscious. Thus the message imparted to the subject by the other, for
Laplanche, the mother or concrete other, is an enigma both to the receiver,
but also to the sender of the message: the ‘messages are enigmatic because
… [they] are strange to themselves’.

Laplanche does not confine his discussion of the enigmatic message to
psychoanalysis, but suggests instead that transference occurs not first in the
psychoanalytic setting to be applied in culture, but the other way around:
‘maybe transference is already, “in itself”, outside the clinic’. For Laplanche,
the critic or recipient-analyst is involved in a two-way dynamic with the
enigmatic message: s/he is, ‘caught between two stools: the enigma which is
addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public’.

So, following Laplanche, rather than use psychoanalytic theory to unravel
or fix the ‘unconscious’ aspects of a work, I suggest that the critic is presented
with the work as an enigma, and that s/he also produces another enigma
in the form of a critical essay. It is possible to imagine then that the critic
responds to a work drawing on the modes of operation of the analyst, as well
as those more associative states – such as remembering and imagining – of
the analysand.

This essay is conducted in the experimental and interdisciplinary spirit
of my ongoing ‘site-writing’ project, which generates spatial and textual
processes of art and architectural criticism out of psychoanalytic positions
and modes of operation. Drawing on Howard Caygill’s notion of strategic
critique, which shares with immanent critique the capacity for discovering
or inventing the criteria of critical judgement in the course of criticism’, I
suggest that with his/her responsibility to address the work and an audience,
the critic occupies a discrete position as mediator and that this situatedness
plays a part in conditioning the performance of his/her interpretative role.
Interested in how the spatial and often changing positions we occupy as
critics – materially, conceptually, emotionally and ideologically – create
conditions which make possible acts of interpretation and constructions of
meaning, my practice of ‘site-writing’ operates in the interactive space of the analytic object, between critic and work, but also between essay and reader. Drawing on interpretative modes of analysis to provide the structure, and construction and association to propose the detail, my aim is to configure a response, not only to the work, but also to the invitations of others, which frame the conditions of my response, and provide a setting which positions me in relation to the work and my future reader.23
Prologue: *The Re-Enchantment*

15 September 2009

Dear Jane,

Hoping this finds you well. It’s been YEARS!
Please find attached a book proposal [*Towards The Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*] - I would be honoured if you would be able to consider contributing. I hope all is clear in the document about the brief but can obviously hope to answer any questions. [...] Copy would be due in February 2010.
I would be very grateful if you were able to let me know if this is of interest/or not at your earliest convenience.

Many thanks!

very best,

Gareth Evans

writer, editor, curator\(^{24}\)
May Morn

The house is beautiful – a one-storey building, with a square plan – born at the birth of modernism in the aftermath of the First World War. It embodies the values of early English modernism, of the Arts and Crafts movement: ‘truth to materials’ and honest craftsmanship.
From the road it looks a little unloved, in need of some care and attention. Up close it is clearly derelict, almost in ruins.
We enter a room with windows at each end. Curtains are falling away from the runners. The fabric has been soaked overnight and is drying in the spring afternoon sunshine.
On the window cill and spilling over onto the floor are piles of old magazines. The pages are stuck together and disintegrate if you try to pull them apart.
There are some photographs of buildings. One is particularly damp; the corners are soft, the surface is wrinkled.
It shows a tower block, just completed, empty and pristine, a moss-green utopia, the modernist dream dispersing as it soaks up spring rain.

Note: The captions to these photographs are taken from a text, originally entitled ‘Moss Green’, written as one in a series of three, contained within a critical essay on the work of artist Elina Brotherus and published as ‘Longing for the Lightness of Spring’.25
Longing for the Lightness of Spring

The Culmination of all Longing and Desire

Elina Brotherus’ photographs are all about past time – time spent loving, time spent remembering, time spent mourning, time spent yearning. Much of the work is a recording of what has happened, rather than what is to happen. This is why Spring (2001), a piece of work commissioned by Jules Wright for the Wapping Project, London, is unusual for Brotherus. As well as using video, a media seldom used in her practice, the work looks forward rather than backwards, described in her own words as: ‘the culmination of all longing and desire’.

Spring is composed of two installations: a video triptych in the boiler house and a back-lit image, 3m x 8m, Untitled (2001), reflected in the water tank on the roof of the Wapping Project. Untitled is an illuminated horizon that divides sky from earth. Like the scene in the distance, where a dark and dense London meets light cloud overhead, the pale grey sky of Iceland floats above once-viscous lava now covered in moss green. Brotherus requested that the work be time specific. Spring opened in Wapping as we entered winter, just after the autumn equinox in the northern hemisphere.

Moss Green

It’s a beautiful house – a one-storey building, with a square plan – born at the birth of modernism in the aftermath of the First World War. It embodies the values of early English modernism, of the arts and crafts movement: ‘truth to materials’ and honest craftsmanship. From the road it looks a little unloved, in need of some care and attention. Up close it is clearly derelict, almost in ruins. We enter a room with windows at each end. Curtains are falling away from the runners. The fabric has been soaked overnight and is drying in the spring afternoon sunshine. On the window cill and spilling over onto the floor are piles of old magazines. The pages are stuck together and disintegrate if you pull them apart. There are some photographs of buildings. One is particularly damp; the corners are soft, the surface is wrinkled. It shows a tower block, just completed, empty and pristine, a moss-green utopia, the modernist dream dispersing as it soaks up spring rain.

Rain, The Oak Forest, Flood (2001)

Brotherus told me how much she hates the darkness of the Finnish winter and yearns for spring each year. It was no different when she moved to Paris, perhaps worse because she felt trapped in an urban setting with no view of the horizon. In search of spring, she left the city and went to Brittany and the Loire Valley. The videos make up a triptych, projected on screens hung from the ceiling, Rain, The Oak Forest, Flood. The first shows rain, streaming down. The second shows an oak forest after the rain has stopped, but when drops, still heavy, continue to fall to the ground, John Betjeman’s ‘second rain’. The third is of a flood, a forest of elegant trees rise silver from a pane of shining
water. Each video work has a different time loop, so there is an ever-changing combination of raining, rained and rain over.

In Finland, the skylark is the earliest bird to sing, its song heralds the coming of spring one month away. Like Jane Mulfinger’s poignant piece, Nachtigall, 3.00 Uhr, Berlin Stadtmitte, (1996), where the artist recorded the song of a nightingale, which sang all night in the city, until dawn broke and his song was slowly drowned out by traffic noise, Brotherus’ water-logged spring landscape recalls the delicate beauty of this stifled birdsong. For Brotherus Spring is about beauty, yet given what we know of climate change, it is also somehow prophetic.

**White Linen**
I dreamt of the house last night. My mother’s house in Cwmgors, south Wales, a place where it always rained in the holidays, that as a girl I resented, but now, as it is being taken from me, I already begin to miss. I was in the dining room; the rest of the house was empty except this one room. The furniture was far too big and covered in linen. The air was thick and still, silent. With the curtains drawn, it was very dark, but the linen glowed white. I went towards the mantelpiece to take a look at myself in the mirror, and I saw for the first time in the reflection, that the room was full of plants; so alive I could smell moisture still on their leaves.

**Depicting a Sentiment**
Suites Françaises 2 are photographs of Brotherus’ home when she first arrived in France from Finland. On strategically placed post-it notes, Brotherus’ script précisely yet gently names each object she sees in her new tongue, as well as parts of herself and her emotions. Brotherus’ says these are images ‘depicting a sentiment’. She looks straightforward, childlike in her directness, yet the simple naming operation demonstrates the inability of words to connect. To paraphrase Gillian Wearing, ‘signs don’t say what we want them to say’. Could it be that Lacan was right after all, that we are not in control of language, that on the contrary, language makes us?

Much of Brotherus’ earlier work deals with intimate and personal subject matter, the death of her parents, the break up of her marriage, the desperation at the end of an affair. The photographs show Brotherus experiencing intense emotions. For her, these images ‘tell it as it was’ – they are not set ups. We see her genuinely distraught, we feel for her. But she is also capable of standing back. In many, for example in Love Bites II (1999), we are shown the artist holding the mechanism used to take the photograph. Here she is, both the image’s subject and its maker. In showing herself as the producer of the artwork, Brotherus reassures us she is all right. She breaks the magic, the illusion of the image, and in so doing takes charge of her own emotional life.

Brotherus trained as an analytic chemist before becoming an artist. The analytic chemist is still there, looking carefully, patiently breaking things down into their most simple components, and recording with exactitude life
as it occurs. When we met we spoke of our mutual love of precision. Brotherus
drew one hand down the centre of her face. She sees herself as split down the
middle – the analytic chemist and the artist – the rational and the intuitive,
the objective and subjective. It emerges that she has been working away from
the personal towards the general: the ‘post-it note phase’ is right in between.

**To Be Able to See Far**

In 2000 Brotherus began a new phase of work, entitled the *New Painting*, a
series which critically explores certain motifs and genres in classical painting.
For example, a series of images entitled *Le Mirroir* (2001) shows the artist in a
bathroom filled with steam facing a mirror above a basin. In each successive
image, read from left to right, the steam slowly evaporates and her face comes
into focus in the mirror. Steam is a fascinating material, the marking of a brief
moment of transformation from thick liquid to ephemeral gas. Rather like
that brief instance in the mirror, when we hope that in catching sight of our
reflection we will recognize ourselves.

Another group of work within the *New Painting* focuses on landscapes
rather than the human figure. Brotherus has produced a series of horizons.
These are scenes cut in half, ice and sky, stone and sky, earth and sky. The
horizon is important to Brotherus; she needs ‘to be able to see far’. All the
*New Paintings* work with the same colour palette and distribution of tones.
There are dark tones: blacks, blues and greens; and light tones: whites, pinks
and greys; but not a lot in between. There is a strength and simplicity to this
contrast in brightness that corresponds to the silver steel and rich brick of
Wapping. The difference in weight between these sombre colours resembles
the material qualities that distinguish between the elements – water, earth
and air.

**Bittersweet**

In Palafrugell, a small town north of Barcelona on the Costa Brava is a derelict
cork factory with a clock tower in front. The clock tower is a handsome structure,
elegant and robust, but the clock on top has stopped. The floor is covered in dust and
pieces of furniture, lamp-stands, chairs and old printing machinery. There are words
everywhere scattered all over the floor: burnt orange, turquoise, black and white,
bittersweet. We stay in the factory a long time. We don’t speak, just walk and look.
Later, once we’ve left the building, he brings something to show me. It is a white sign
with carefully painted black letters: ‘Bittersweet’. I reach into my bag and pull out a
clear perspex rod; along one side of it letters printed onto cardboard are embedded.
From the top it is out of focus, but from the side, you can read it: ‘Bittersweet’.

If matter has a weight, does emotion?
If space has a colour, does time?
What is the colour of longing, longing for the lightness of spring?
Brotherus’ *Spring* was composed of two installations: a back-lit image *Untitled*, where a pale grey Icelandic sky floating over moss-covered lava was reflected in the water tank on the roof, and a video triptych, *Rain, The Oak Forest and Flood*. My essay made spatial, material and visual associations with Brotherus’ work: the structure of the triptych, the textures of moss and lava, and the motif of reflection. But there are also temporal correspondences. *Spring* opened in Wapping just after the autumn equinox in the northern hemisphere. ‘Moss Green’ describes a spring visit to a derelict house in the green belt where we found decaying photographs of a brave new world of modernist high-rise housing. Just after the autumn equinox, just after her death, I dreamt of live plants reflected in the mirror of the home of my Welsh great aunt. ‘White Linen’ recalls this dream. While ‘Bittersweet’ remembers another spring visit, this time to an abandoned cork factory in Catalunya where we found the names of colours scattered over the floor.

Anticipating the end of winter, curatorially, *Spring* faced towards the long decline into winter, the season from which it desired to turn away. Paralleling this juxtaposition which poised spring’s hope for winter’s retreat right at winter’s early edge, I positioned *Spring’s* foregrounding of anticipation as a yearning that looks forward to the resurgence of new life, against my own fascination with a longing which turns in the other direction – the backwards gaze of nostalgia. In responding to *Spring*, my three tri-partite textual construction – ‘Moss Green’, ‘White Linen’ and ‘Bittersweet’ – connected Brotherus’ landscapes infused with anticipatory longing to associations of my own, places tinted by nostalgia, constructing a tension between life and death, rejuvenation and decay, a looking forward and a turning backward.
Moss Green (or May Morn)

My first visit to the house I came to call ‘Moss Green’ had occurred in the spring of 2001. For the next decade I was to walk past Moss Green several times a year, as part of my weekly Sunday walk. Every Sunday morning, whatever the weather, taking a flask of hot soup to be supped under the dripping branches of winter trees, or a picnic to be eaten in a sunlit meadow, my partner and I make the journey to Waterloo or London Bridge, and board a train taking us to the limit of the metropolis – to London’s so-called green belt. After an about an hour (and more recently with the collapse of the Sunday rail network, more like two) we disembark from the train and walk into the dusk along the paths of the Weald.

In our walks out of Sevenoaks we sometimes take the route down Oak Lane, then Grassy Lane, past Fig Street and along Gracious Lane, drawing to a halt at the fork in the road where Moss Green is situated. When we first saw the house we were entirely enchanted, with the way of life it represented as well as the arresting beauty of its slow yet gentle decay. The house was single storey, of a brick-and-timber construction, placed at the top of a scarp slope – with its porch facing a view out over southern England, under which two benches faced one another.

The interior was full of exquisite touches: a perfectly placed built-in cupboard, a carefully detailed window cill and frame, a thoughtful light switch, a door handle that fitted like a glove. It was hovering at that point where the decay was still able to provide an atmosphere of charm, where the thought of collapse could be held off, and where it was still possible to imagine oneself into the house, repairing the woodwork and occupying the rooms. We guessed it had probably been built after the First World War, perhaps as part of the programme ‘Homes fit for Heroes’ which allowed returning and often traumatized soldiers to readjust to civilian life in the comfort of a simple domestic setting with space for gardening and growing food.

But over the years the house has increasingly fallen into disrepair, and our spirits now sink each time we see it. When its slate roof was removed around three years ago the rot really set in and as a structure it is now barely stable. As it slipped passed the threshold of being ‘save-able’, we surrendered our dream of living there ourselves in a modest rural retreat. No doubt the new owner is waiting for the moment of collapse, when the walls cave in, in order to construct a dwelling that requires no restorative work.

I wonder whether Moss Green should have been listed, whether I should have taken on that task myself. And if it is not valued as a piece of architectural heritage, what are those emotional qualities it holds that make it feel special enough to want to save?

On one visit, years ago, when the house was open to the elements, but some of its contents were still present, we noted books on architecture, old journals from the building trade and piles of photographs. We salvaged a few items – notably one book, *New Architecture of London: A Selection of Buildings*
since 1930, along with a selection of back and white photographs, some of which are reproduced here. Recently, in examining the photographs more closely, I have become fascinated with tracking down the buildings imaged in them. As well as the architectural qualities of the structures, I have had five text-based clues to work with – a board in front of one block of flats with the name: ‘Ernest Knifton Ltd.’; a car parked outside another with the registration plate: ‘SLX 956’; a street sign reading ‘Westmoreland Terrace’; and letters over the entrances to two other buildings with the words: ‘1-24 Edmund Street’ and ‘Witl’.

In working between New Architecture of London as well as web searches for the various clues, I have managed to track down most of the structures – it turns out that the majority we now regard as modernist icons. At the same time I have been searching for a new flat of my own in London to live in. So I took the opportunity to view these buildings via the website primelocation.com. The search revealed their ‘value’ in economic terms, as property, as commodities. From an estate agent’s perspective, these flats are described as ideal investments, not as places where the purchaser might choose to live, but rather as buy-to-let opportunities, real estate to be rented out to students and others. The images of fully occupied domestic settings on the property website provided an interesting counterbalance to the just-completed exteriors photographed from the outside, positioning the architecture as a commodity to be purchased by individuals as well as (or instead of?) social entities to be lived in by communities.

Searching for modernist icons through primelocation.com has been a stark reminder of what has happened to the socialist ideals of modernism. Some of the modern movement’s public housing projects have become oases of cool property in the London postcodes associated with the rich; those in the west of the capital have often been well maintained and sometimes privatized and provided with concierge schemes, and others in areas of regeneration have been connected with the aspirations of up-and-coming neighbourhoods and the somewhat grimy conditions of their rather neglected public spaces – lifts, stairways and façades – overlooked by purchasers keen to be part of the lifestyles offered by certain parts of London in terms of cultural caché: independent boutiques, cafes and galleries.

Those pieces of modern architecture in the poorer boroughs, outside the pockets of existing wealth and the aspiring regeneration zones, have been allowed to decline materially, often not included in ‘major works’ programmes – the large-scale council repair and maintenance cycles. Often located in so-called ‘sink estates’, many of the blocks house the poorest families in London. Some have been demolished either because the years of neglect have led to conditions of terminal dereliction, or because the original construction is viewed to be too expensive to overhaul. But the seemingly pragmatic solution offered by viewing the problems through economic concerns, is perhaps better understood as a symptom. Modern architecture is often seen as intimately tied to social deprivation and this has forced the designers of certain regeneration...
schemes to adopt a new architectural language: one which is not so obviously ‘modern’ and is therefore capable of suggesting optimism, community and better standards of living in a different way.

But what of the person who lived in Moss Green and once owned the photographs of these modern buildings? Was he or she an architect, and if so did they play a role in designing the buildings in the photographs? How did they compare these schemes for urban mass housing with their own rural bungalow? If the delicate beauty of Moss Green points outwards to a whole network of modernist icons, how should one compare these two modernisms – the earlier vernacular, craft-based phase of the Arts and Crafts with the later phase of industrialization and standardization?

From Tacita Dean’s work critiquing the heroism of modernism by pointing to the failure of certain technological schemes, such as Sound Mirrors (1999), to Rut Blees Luxemburg’s glowing photographs of north London’s high-rise flats, Caliban Towers I and II, which label modernist architecture a monster, there has been a recent fascination with the so-called failure of the modern project. In some cases, this takes the form of a wistful melancholy for modernism’s passing, and at other times a more gleeful delight at the collapse of a social dream, which some see as too forceful and others as ridiculously idealistic.28

For a short period in 1998, as part of a public art project, Wide, curated by art-architecture collaborative practice muf, Caliban Towers I and II was installed under a railway bridge on the corner of Old Street and Shoreditch High Street in east London, a mile or so down the road from the very housing projects depicted in the image. Along with the commercial billboards, pigeon dirt and rough graffiti, the insertion of fine art photography into a grubby bit of Hackney could be understood as an indication of the future of the area. Within a few months, the photograph was removed, but for a short while in 1998 a fragment of the democratic socialism of the modernist high-rise dream was juxtaposed with a particular stretch of street undergoing the first stage of gentrification, the kind of urban improvement typical of the postmodern capitalist city, while up the Hackney Road on a sunny Sunday in July, while Caliban Towers I and II were resident in south Hoxton, a block of flats just like them was demolished, dust in nine seconds.

Caliban Towers I and II (1997) is one in a series entitled London – A Modern Project. The photograph images two high-rise buildings aspiring to touch the skies. Shot at night with a long exposure, the architecture gains a strange luminescence. If the work is an elegy, a mourning of the modernist project, concerned as it was with social justice and progress, what does that imply? Who has the right to decide if these buildings have failed, that they should be demolished and on what grounds? Is a better future on offer? On the other hand, the desire to portray these buildings as beautiful might be taken as a plea to celebrate them. However, for those who live in these often decaying infrastructures, is it possible to consider them as such? Is this a vision that only someone removed from the realities of living in these poorly maintained environments could afford to have?
In a gallery setting, Luxemburg’s seductive images of the modernist dream as a sad and beautiful failure certainly fail to invite critical engagement and face the charge of a luxurious and perhaps nostalgic disengagement that only some can afford to adopt – the ability maybe to escape certain aspects of social reality such as impoverished housing conditions. Yet, when situated in this particular urban location at a moment when debates about which buildings to demolish and which to maintain in order to fulfil the developers’ ambitions for regeneration were ongoing activates the work with social potential. Positioned back in its own neighbourhood – a site undergoing redevelopment – this imaged fragment of a modernist London housing project is able to ask quite different questions.

I’m not so sure modernism has failed, rather I think the aspirations for social community and progress it embodies have been driven out, in England at least, by a Conservative and then a Labour government keen to promote an ideology of home ownership. If everyone is weighed down by a hefty mortgage, the capacity for dissent is drastically reduced, losing a day’s pay by striking might easily mean losing the roof over one’s head. There is a lot at stake when the social housing of the modernist project is sold off as ‘a good opportunity for investment’ on primelocation.com; it is perhaps not overstating the case to suggest it has created a disaster for the Left, not only because the number of homes available to let by the council are reduced for those who need them, but also because those who buy them become part of the propertied class and all that entails.

I know this because I am part of the problem.

The decaying images of modernism bring to mind Alison Marchant’s Charged Atmospheres of 1993, where she reproduced photographs dating back to the 1970s, thrown away from the National Monuments Records, blown up to life size. The decaying photographs showed neglected interiors, high-ceilinged salons from London’s Georgian building stock. The work doubled the materiality of decay and the related effects or emotional states associated with neglect and abandonment. The deterioration in Charged Atmospheres operated at the level of both signifier and signified – abandoned interiors appeared in abandoned photographs.29

The situation of the photographs found at ‘Moss Green’ is somewhat different; the material decay of the photographs, as ink and paper documents, is counteracted by the aspiration of the just-completed buildings in the images. In these photographs, the buildings are new, they look ahead; it is only the photographs themselves that bear the passage of time. The buildings are well tended to, indeed it might be that what holds them together is their place as the centre of attention in a tour of newly completed social-housing projects. But is it only the photographs themselves that have been left behind, to weather the rain on the Weald over the years?

Returning to Moss Green, once again, several weekends ago, much of the timberwork had collapsed and was lying in pieces over the grass. I turned one rotten section over to reveal two words painted in fast-fragmenting white
letters: ‘May Morn’. This, I remembered, was the building’s name plaque, which had been located at the entrance to the plot, framed by brambles, when we first came across the house.

Morn and mourn are homonyms; one suggests a beginning, the other an ending. Morning begins the day, while mourning – in grieving the loss of something or someone – marks an ending. Due to their deteriorating material states – the Moss Green house, the paper of the photographs and the painted letters ‘May Morn’ – each of the three points towards its own disintegration or ending, yet the buildings contained within the photographs are shown at the beginning of their life. What does it mean, now, to turn back and examine these icons of modernism at an early moment – a spring time – when hope for a better future was not viewed as a naïvely misjudged optimism?

On a bright spring day – a May morn no less – one day before a general election, I remain hopeful, facing forward. This is not a time for mourning, not a time for grieving the failure of the modernist project: such a gesture needs to be resisted. The ideals of modernism are ones to be cherished; not only aesthetically, but also, and importantly, politically. It is I think precisely because an aspiration for social change remains that we are being presented, continuously, with an image of modernism as a project that has collapsed – this is the myth-making of a capitalist ideology.

Writing positively of nostalgia, as a longing for something better, Jameson has pointed out, with reference to the earlier work of Walter Benjamin on allegory and ruin, that looking back to a past because it appears to be better than the problems of the present is not necessarily regressive, especially if it can be used to change the future. He writes: ‘But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with Fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other …’. 30
I wrote the first version of this essay on a May morn, a day before the general election of 6 May 2010 in the United Kingdom, and I delivered it as a talk six days later, after I had voted Liberal for the first time in my life, so disgusted was I with New Labour’s lies over the Iraq War, and with the transfer of public funds into the hands of the banking elite, on a day the coalition between the Liberals and Tories was formed, on a day on which I discovered I had helped to deliver the country a Tory government.

A bright doctoral student, Justin Hunt, approached me after my talk and asked: ‘Did you know there are two homonyms in the title of your talk not one?’ I looked back blankly. ‘May the month and may the verb,’ he explained. And then added, ‘You seem to be asking for a right to mourn.’

It turns out May is a homograph not a homonym; May is a month of the year, but may is also a modal verb – one which expresses possibility: ‘the modernist project may well succeed’; one which is used when admitting that something is so before making another, more important point: ‘modernist buildings may have had a socialist agenda, but they looked great’; one which is used to express a wish or hope: ‘may modernism rest in peace?’; and finally one which is used to request permission: ‘may I mourn?’

So post election and post New Labour’s ambivalence towards the public sphere, the advent of the new Liberal-Conservative agenda suggests there will be no ambivalence over the public sector – drastic cuts are to be made. The emptying out of the public purse is something we are now living out – ‘twenty colleges and universities are currently in dispute with UCU [University and College Union] over compulsory redundancies.’

In such a political climate this essay and its sense of hope starts to feel rather inappropriate as an emotion for these dark times – a nostalgia for modernist housing is a turning back to an idealized time in order to seek inspiration for a better future, but it now seems to be a turning back that takes place not so much with romantic regret but rather with a deep anger as I watch the start of the slow demolition of the public sector – potentially the end of that modern project of which these housing schemes are a key part.
Epilogue: Beyond Utopia

28 April 2010

Dear Jane,

We are writing to you with regard to a project we have been working on with Robin Wilson, titled ‘Planning for Utopia’ which was supported by the AHRC. We realise you have exerted invaluable influence on the project, although indirect, through supervising Robin’s PhD. Knowing something of your areas of expertise and having met you at the ‘Architecture and Documentary Practice’ seminar at the Bartlett we thought you may be interested in this next stage of the project. We have been generating a screenplay that in part documents the ‘Planning for Utopia’ research process and speculates beyond. We are now producing a publication in association with Brandon LaBelle and some other interesting writers and we would very much like you to contribute to it.

The publication is titled ‘Beyond Utopia’ (working title) which takes the form of a screenplay accompanied by seven written contributions. It will be published as the 4th in a series of Surface Tension Supplements by a specialist art / architecture publisher, Errant Bodies Press based in Los Angeles www.errantbodies.org. We are inviting contributors from various fields to develop a piece of writing in response to the screenplay with the aim of provoking further discussion and speculation in the ideas raised within it.

The timescale for outline proposals is three weeks after receipt of this invitation and the 1st of August 2010 for completed contributions.

We attach further details of the publication, contributions and a list of other contributors who are being approached and those who have confirmed. We also attach the screenplay ‘Beyond Utopia’ which we hope you enjoy reading. We very much hope you will be able to participate and look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Jonathan & Sophie

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May Mourn

A spacious one bedroom flat situated on the eight floor commanding marvelous views of communal gardens and the city beyond. The property is located in a Grade II listed ex-local authority block with two newly installed lifts giving easy access to the shopping, restaurants and transport facilities of Bayswater (Circle & District lines) and Queensway (Central line), plus overground routes of Paddington. Magnificent Kensington Gardens are also close by.

This property comprises of two double bedrooms and offers spacious living accommodation. The property is situated on the third floor and is in very good condition. The flat would be ideal for a first time buyer or a rental investment. It also benefits from being close to Roehampton university and local amenities.

A well-presented, bright one bedroom flat on the sixth floor of this Grade II listed modern block of flats, serviced by two lifts. This ex-council flat benefits from spacious rooms and communal gardens. The property is offered in good decorative order throughout further benefiting from being chain free. The property is ideally located for the shopping, entertainment and public transport facilities of Queensway, Lancaster Gate and Paddington.

A practical three bedroom flat split over two levels on the upper level of this small block in Churchill Gardens. The property consists of two double and one single bedrooms, kitchen, reception room, bathroom, separate WC and a large balcony. The property requires updating but gives potential buyers the chance to put their own stamp on the property.

An unmodernised two bedroom flat set on the first floor (lift) of this block on the superbly located Hallfield Estate (Westminster Council) in Bayswater. Occupying approximately 736 sq.ft/ 68 sq.m the property comprises two double bedrooms, reception room, generously sized kitchen, bathroom and separate wc and once refurbished would make an excellent Central London home or long term rental investment. Situated close to an abundance of amenities including Whiteley’s Shopping Centre, Paddington Station / Heathrow Express, Lancaster Gate (Central Line) station and the open spaces of Hyde Park.

Another great located flat for sale. The property offers a well proportioned one bedroomed flat located on the eight floor with great views (don’t worry about the mortgage, most high street banks will lend due to its excellent location).33

*
I presented a version of this text as a lecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in early June 2010 and was again advised by a smart doctoral student, this time Jon Dale, to read Owen Hatherley’s *Militant Modernism*. In referencing Richard Pare’s amazing photographs of the ruins of the Russian ‘vanguard’, Hatherley reminded me of the link between the early Russian Constructivist projects of the 1920s and the aspirations of British modernism, particularly the post-war social housing schemes by the London County Council. It reminded me of my fascination as an architecture student with the notion of the ‘social condenser’, which by overlaying a number of functional programmes suggested that architectural space might promote new kinds of social relations.

The concept of the social condenser was developed through the theoretical and then practical work of the Russian Constructivists in the 1920s. Quoting artist Aleksei Gan, ‘the capitalist towns are staunch allies of counter-revolution’, architectural historian Catherine Cooke describes Gan’s belief that the existing design of cities did not allow the social form of the revolution to flourish. She goes on to suggest ‘a logical implication’, that if one were to design the right kind of space, this would promote the new kind of society: ‘if a “misfitting” environment can obstruct social change, a “fitting” one can foster it. If spatial organization can be a negative catalyst, it can also be a positive one’. Cooke discusses how the notion of the social condenser invented and promoted by the Constructivists had to be, following Gan, actively ‘revolutionary’, and according to its subsequent development by architect and theorist Moisei Ginzburg, must ‘work’ materially.

Low voltage activity and a weak consciousness would be focused through the circuits of these ‘social condensers’ into high-voltage catalysts of change, in the habits and attitudes of the mass population.

This Constructivist design methodology was developed in the designs for apartment types ‘A-F’ for STROIKOM, the Russian Building Committee, and then realized in six schemes, including the Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow, designed by Ginzburg with Ignatii Milinis in 1928-1929.

In Victor Buchli’s fascinating in-depth ethnographic study of the Narkomfin, he underscores the importance of generating a new socialist *byt* or daily life, domesticity, lifestyle or way of life, for architectural designers in this period. He explains how OSA (Union of Contemporary Architects), headed by Ginzberg:

sought to address the issue of the new *byt* by creating an entirely new rationalized architecture and material culture based on communist theories of industrialized production and on patterns of consumption guided by socialist ethics.
Buchli discusses how the original programme for the Narkomfin included four separate buildings: a living block with three types of living unit following the STROIKOM guidelines (F, 2-F and K types, along with dormitory units), the communal block (with a kitchen, dining room, gymnasium and library), a mechanical laundry building and a communal crèche, which was never built. Buchli explains that the Narkomfin was a ‘social condenser’ of the transitional type. This meant that the accommodation allowed for both pre-existing bourgeois living patterns (K and 2-F units) and fully Communist F units. The main distinction between the two was that the former included kitchens and a family hearth, while the latter was primarily a sleeping unit with minimal facilities for preparing food, since cooking and eating were to take place in the communal block. Buchli stresses that the variety was not an expression of tolerance, but rather reflected the OSA belief that architecture had a transformative power, capable of ‘induc[ing] a particular form of social organization’, and that the intention was that the building would help ease those following bourgeois living patterns into adopting socialist ones.

Le Corbusier, whose articles were read by Ginzberg and other Social Constructivists in the early 1920s, made visits in the mid to late 1920s to the Soviet Union to study the architecture. In the ‘slab block’ of the Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles, Corbusier was inspired by many key aspects of the Narkomfin design – its central axis (rue intérieure) the variable range in possible apartment types, including one with double-height living space, and the provision of communal facilities – but at the same time references to Le Corbusier’s five-point plan (comprising piloti, free façade, open plan, ribbon windows and a roof garden) are evident in the Narkomfin.

Architectural historian Nicholas Bullock outlines how Corbusier’s Unité, which began construction in 1947, was also a point of reference for the architects of the London County Council in the 1950s, and that while the architects of Alton East at Roehampton were advocates of New Humanism, those of Alton West were ‘pro-Corbu’. Bullock also refers to the hot debates held in London pubs over the adoption of the principles of the Unité, and how these were linked to divergent socialist views and attitudes to Soviet communism. Yet while he describes the loss of certain design principles vital to the Unité in the process of reformulating the project for London’s public-housing provision – the difficulty in retaining the communal spaces, double-height living rooms and central access corridor – he fails to focus on the debt that Le Corbusier owed to the Narkomfin design. This results in an argument that vacates the political imperative at the heart of the Narkomfin and the public-housing projects in France and the UK that its design inspired. In failing to make full reference to the potential of the social condenser in activating social change, the link is lost between architecture and revolution.

At this moment, on the brink of the collapse of the public sphere, I’d like to put forward the social condenser as architecture’s political unconscious, an aspect, in Jameson’s terms, of the ‘repressed and buried history’ of class struggle.
I consider this essay, according to Freud’s psychoanalytic practice, as a ‘construction’, ‘a moment when one lays before the subject of the analysis a piece of his early history’. In this moment, I lay the Narkomfin, a piece of early history, before those photographs of London’s modernist social housing found at May Morn, the subject of this analysis.
List of Images

Image 1: Found image, date and title unknown, showing the Hallfield Estate (1952-1955), Bishops Bridge Road, London W2, designed by Tecton, Drake and Lasdun for Paddington Borough Council.

Image 2: Found image, date and title unknown, showing the Hallfield Estate (1952-1955), Bishops Bridge Road, London W2, designed by Tecton, Drake and Lasdun for Paddington Borough Council.

Image 3: Found image, date and title unknown, showing either the Alton East Estate (1952-1955), Portsmouth Road, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect’s Dept. or the Alton West Estate (1955-1959), Roehampton Lane, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect’s Dept.

Image 4: Found image, date and title unknown, showing Churchill Gardens (1950-1962), Grosvenor Road, Lupus Street, SW1, designed by Powell and Moya for Westminster City Council.

Image 5: Found image, date and title unknown, showing Churchill Gardens (1950-1962), Grosvenor Road, Lupus Street, SW1, designed by Powell and Moya for Westminster City Council.

Image 6: Found image, date and title unknown, showing the Hallfield Estate (1952-1955), Bishops Bridge Road, London W2, designed by Tecton, Drake and Lasdun for Paddington Borough Council.
Bibliography


Green, A. ‘The Analyst, Symbolization and Absence in the Analytic Setting (On


Notes


14 Bollas, ‘Freudian Intersubjectivity’, p. 98.


16 Cathy Caruth, ‘An Interview with Jean Laplanche’ © 2001 Cathy Caruth.

17 Caruth, ‘An Interview with Jean Laplanche’.


23 While Jameson is highly sceptical of critical writings that create homologies between the production of texts and factory production, as well as the inclusion of the signifier within materialist critique, I argue that if one is to engage with unconscious processes then it is not only the literary text placed under analysis which must be included within the critical process but also the text produced by the critic him/herself, and that the material conditions which give rise to the production of such texts need to be taken into account. See Jameson, The Political Unconscious, p. 30.


26 Sam Lambert (ed.), New Architecture of London: A Selection of Buildings since
1930. The British Travel and Holidays Association in collaboration with the Architectural Association (1963).

27 These include the Elmington Estate (1957), Picton Street, London SE5, designed by the LCC Architect’s Dept., now largely demolished; the Hallfield Estate (1952-1955), Bishops Bridge Road, W2, designed by Tecton, Drake and Lasdun for Paddington Borough Council; the Alton East Estate (1952-1955), Portsmouth Road, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect’s Dept.; the Alton West Estate (1955-1959), Roehampton Lane, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect’s Dept.; and Churchill Gardens (1950-1962), Grosvenor Road, Lupus Street, SW1, designed by Powell and Moya for Westminster City Council.


29 See Alison Marchant, Field Study 3, (University of the Arts London and the Archive Research Centre at the London College of Communication, London, n.d.).


31 Email correspondence from Sally Hunt, ‘An update for members from Sally Hunt, UCU general secretary’, 26 May 2010.

32 Excerpt from email of 28 April 2010 from Sophie Warren and Jonathan Moseley to Jane Rendell. I delivered a text-work to Sophie and Jonathan in July 2010 for inclusion in their co-edited collection Beyond Utopia, which is entitled ‘May Mourn’. This collection is currently, as of 3 November 2010, in press.

33 All quotes taken from primelocation.com, May 2010.

34 Owen Hatherley, Militant Modernism (Winchester, 2008).


40 Buchli, An Archaeology of Socialism, p. 23.


42 Buchli, ‘Moisei Ginzburg’s Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow’, p. 162.


44 Le Corbusier developed his five-point plan through publications in the journal
