

## **les mots and les choses**

In 2001 when Jules Wright asked me to write about 'Spring', a work by Elina Brotherus she had commissioned for the Wapping Project in London, I found myself turning to three short texts I had written concerning three sites – two remembered, one dreamed. 'Spring' was composed of two installations: a video triptych, 'Rain, The Oak Forest and Flood', in the boiler house and a back-lit image 'Untitled', showing a pale grey Icelandic sky over lava covered in moss, reflected in the water tank on the roof. A work that anticipates spring, the work opened in Wapping just after the autumn equinox in the northern hemisphere. Brotherus' interest in longing and my own in nostalgia provided me with three positions from which to consider her work in relation to themes of longing, nostalgia, anticipation and yearning.

### moss green

It's a beautiful house - 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 un-loved, 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.

### white linen

I dreamt of the house last night. My mothers 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 mantel-piece 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.

### 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 square section rod; along one side of it letters printed onto cardboard are embedded in the perspex. From the top it is out of focus, but from the side, you can read it: 'Bittersweet'.

'Moss Green' describes a derelict house in the green belt where in early March we found photographs of a brave new world of modernist high-rise housing. Just after the autumn equinox, just after her death, I dreamt of the home of my Welsh great aunt. 'White Linen' recalls this dream, while 'Bittersweet' remembers a spring visit to an abandoned cork factory in Catalunya where we found the names of colours scattered over the floor.

For an expedition to Seoul, as 'what is the colour of memory?' (April 2002), each text was translated into Korean and accompanied by its 'object': an album of photographs found at Moss Green, a white linen cloth, and the word 'bittersweet' found in the factory. The texts were translated back into written English from the Korean audio recordings for their journey to Los Angeles as 'the voice one cannot control' (November 2002). In moving, the words were translated from English to Korean and back again, from writing to speaking and back again. For 'Concrete Feedback at SYARC curated by artist Brandon La Belle, the three pairs of texts were placed along a corridor with three columns, each one either side of a column. Three audio installations positioned the Korean voice at the point where the texts could no longer be read together.

When the work moved again, this time to the Entwistle Gallery in London as 'Les Mots et Les Choses' for 'Material Intelligence' in 2002, three objects were re-inserted, sited in the slippage in language produced through translation and displacement. In 'Les Mots and Les Choses' (1966), translated into English as 'The Order of Things', Michel Foucault explores the ordering of relationships between different cultural elements, for example, those that are real, those that represent, those that resemble, those that can be imagined.<sup>1</sup> Between words and things, between writing and speaking, between one place and another, this site-writing is a two-way inscription, real and imagined, dreamed and remembered, of sites written and writings sited.

The work was exhibited at 'Les mots at les choses', (text/object installation), for [Material Intelligence](#),

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, [1966], (translated from the French), London: Routledge, 1992. Originally published in French under the title *Les Mots et Les Choses* by Editions Gallimard. This translation first published in Great Britain in 1970 by Tavistock Publications Limited.

Entwistle, London, (March 2003), and published as 'Les Mots et les Choses', Laura Allen, Iain Borden, Peter Cook and Rachel Stevenson, (eds), Bartlett Works: Architecture, Buildings, Projects, (London: August Projects Ltd., 2004) and in 'Site-Writing', Sharon Kivland, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Emma Cocker, (eds.), Inscription, (Sheffield Hallam University and the Site Gallery, 2005). The work draws on an earlier essay 'Longing for the Lightness of Spring' in Elina Brotherus, The Wapping Project, (London, 2001).

fig 1 'Moss Green'. Photograph by Jane Rendell, 2001.

fig 2 'White Linen'. Photograph by Jane Rendell, 2004.

fig 3 'Bittersweet'. Photograph by David Cross, 2001.

fig 4 Jane Rendell, 'Les Mots and Les Choses', in *Material Intelligence*, Entwistle Gallery, London, 2002. Photographed by the Entwistle Gallery.