

Jane Rendell, May Morn.

In 2001 curator Jules Wright from the Wapping Project invited me to write an essay about Brotherus's work *Spring*. *Spring* was composed of two installations: a video triptych *Rain, The Oak Forest, Flood* (2001) in the boiler house and a back-lit image *Untitled* (2001), three metres by eight metres, reflected in the water tank on the roof of Wapping. *Untitled* showed an illuminated horizon dividing sky from earth: the pale grey sky of Iceland floating above what was once viscous lava now covered in green moss. Projected on screens hung from the ceiling, *Rain, The Oak Forest and Flood*, comprised a video triptych. In the first video, the viewer, located on the inside of a window, watched, as rain streamed down the outside of the glass. The second showed an oak forest after the rain had stopped, but when drops, still heavy, continued to fall to the ground, John Betjeman's 'second rain'. The third video was of a flood, a forest of elegant trees rose silver from a pane of shining water

In responding to *Spring*, I found myself returning to scenes – real and imagined, remembered and dreamed – that corresponded with Brotherus's images and supplemented her landscapes with places of my own. The three places I described made spatial, material and visual associations with Brotherus's *Spring*. In 'Moss Green' I remembered a derelict house in the green belt where in spring 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 shrouded home of my Welsh great aunt. 'White Linen' recalled the presence of life in the form of plants in this dream, while 'Bittersweet' recounted another spring visit, this time to an abandoned cork factory in Catalunya, where we found the names of the colours scattered, abandoned, all over the floor: black, white, orange, turquoise, bittersweet.

Anticipating the end of winter, *Spring* opened in Wapping just after the autumn equinox in the northern hemisphere. Curatorially, the work 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 its early edge, I positioned *Spring's* foregrounding of anticipation as a yearning that looks forward to new life, against my own fascination with the backwards gaze of nostalgia. My three texts – 'Moss Green', 'White Linen' and 'Bittersweet' – connected Brotherus's landscapes infused with anticipatory longing to places tinted by nostalgia, constructing a tension between life and death, rejuvenation and decay, a looking forward and a turning backward.

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 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 then 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 story, 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 sill 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 have 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, which 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 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*,ⁱ along with a selection of black 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, such as: 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.

At the same time I have been searching for a new flat of my own in London to live in. Having just sold a home on the eleventh floor of a 1950s block designed by Joseph Emberton, I am looking for a place to buy and to live in that matches it in terms of design quality, space standards and view. So I took the opportunity to view at these buildings via prime.location.com. The search revealed their 'value' in economic terms, as property, as commodities with prices. 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 facades – 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 seeming pragmatic solution offered by viewing the problems through economic concerns, is a symptom, or perhaps a problem of perception. 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 industrialisation and standardization?

From Tacita Dean's work critiquing the heroism of the modernism by pointing to the failure of certain technological schemes, such as *Delft Hydraulics* (1996) or *Sound Mirrors* (1999), to Rut Blees Luxemburg's

glowing photographs of north London's highrise flats, entitled *Caliban Towers I and II*, from *London – A Modern Project* (1997), which titles modernist architecture as 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, at other times a more gleeful delight at the collapse of a social dream, that some see as too forceful and others as ridiculously idealistic.ⁱⁱ

But 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. There is no doubt that I would have remained closer to the truth to my political ideals if I had continued to rent a room, as I did in my student days. My friends who live in other European capitals, in Barcelona and Berlin for example, still do just that.

But am I really as monstrous as an investor who purchases a flat in a modernist icon to leverage out an income in rent. Does it make a difference that I still aspire to dwell within the modernist ideal, that my home is not simply a commodity, that I enjoy living in a diverse community? The enchantment the high-rise holds for me is a blend of the aesthetic preferences my architectural education instilled in me, and my social ideals. ... And Jane Bennett's project inspires me – she breathes enchantment back into modernity – arguing against its status as site of alienation.ⁱⁱⁱ Her writing makes me understand from a theoretical

perspective how it might still be possible to view architecture's inhabitation of modernity with wonder.

In 2005 Alison Marchant made a work, *Field Study 3: Charged Atmospheres*, 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 affects or emotional states associated with neglect and abandonment. The deterioration in *Charged Atmospheres* operates at the level of both signifier and signified – *abandoned* interiors appear in *abandoned* photographs.

The situation in my image-text work shown here 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 – the signifieds – are new – they look ahead, it is only the photographs themselves – the signifiers – 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 – witness the group of men in overcoats pointing towards certain features. It is only the photographs themselves that have been left behind, to weather the rain on the Weald coming in through the open window over the years.

I have titled this image-text work *May Morn*.

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', all three point towards their own disintegration – or endings, 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, days 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, which has collapsed – this is the myth-making of a capitalist ideology.

Writing positively of nostalgia, as a longing for something better, contemporary cultural critic Frederic 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'^{iv}

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'.^v

ⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱ For a longer discussion of this point see Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

^{iv} Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) p. 82.

^v This essay was commissioned by Jules Wright of the Wapping Project, London and originally published as Jane Rendell, 'Longing for the Lightness of Spring', *Elina Brotherus* (London: The Wapping Project, 2001) pp. 19–26. This essay is part of my larger project of site-writing, initiated as a pedagogic tool at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, from 2001, and as a mode of spatializing writing first in Jane Rendell, 'Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse', Jonathan Hill (ed.) *Occupying Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 229–46, and then developed through a whole series of essays and works, brought together in Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB Tauris, 2010).