

LANGUAGE AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a critical investigation into the relations between language, spatial production and contemporary arts practice within the context of post war social housing in the UK. Exploring parallels between the transformation of language and the forces and networks that govern its transformations, this paper examines three contemporary art works situated within social housing estates scheduled for demolition. The historical context into which the three art works were implemented, is provided through an account of an obsolete council estate in North London known as The Market Estate. Just prior to demolition in 2009, an arts project titled The Market Estate Project took place, in which a selection of artists were commissioned to produce 'site specific artworks that celebrated a colorful and rich last memory of the estate.'

Speculating on the agency of site specific art implemented within redundant models of social housing, The Market Estate Project is contextualised through an examination of Rachel Whitereads *House* (1993), Roger Hiorns *Seizure* (2009) and my own contribution to the Market Estate Project titled *Embodied Text* (2009). The theoretical framework for exploring this field of research is drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature. Established through a critique of Franz Kafka's writings, minor literature denotes a form of practice in which language is deterritorialised to reveal political, social and environmental attributes masked within established forms. Adapting minor literature to explore the implications of deterritorialising dominant forms of social housing in both literary (the media) and aesthetic (contemporary arts practice) domains, this paper investigates the complex networks, multiple logics and rich contradictions specific to the field of contemporary arts practice situated within social housing.

Historical Context : The Market Estate

Situated north of Caledonian Park in the London Borough of Islington, The Market Estate came into being during the great council-housing boom of the 1960's. During this decade some 440000 flats were constructed to overcome post-war housing shortages and to minimize the effects of urban sprawl. The initial surge in construction was fuelled by central government agencies offering incentives to local authorities in the form of subsidies to build council housing en-mass. Local councils responded by offering incentives to the building industry for expediency and volume and facilitated new height requirements by amending planning regulations. Architects developed modernist slab block typology that performed to square meter requirements. The building industry adapted by developing new construction techniques including systems building, enabling a reduction in construction times and overheads. These prefabricated building methods reduced the need for skilled labor, hence transforming the labor market.



Figure 1. The Market Estate

Commissioned by the Greater London Council and designed by architects Faber and Bartholomew, the Market Estate was consistent with the prevailing modernist trends of the time, embracing the utopian vision of shifting entire communities into the air – freeing up a recreational ground plane below. Coined “streets in the sky” this architectural approach deployed open air corridors with the intention of bringing the freedom, flexibility and vibrancy of the street into the domestic environment. Celebrating modernity and drawing inspiration from technology, the ensuing architecture was stripped of ornament and individuality, replacing tradition with the idea of modular living and the universal subject.

Despite the sense of optimism with which such estates were conceived and constructed, no sooner were they tenanted than good intentions backfired. Unbeknown to the idealistic aspirations of the architects and planners, this freedom of circulation within the so called Pedestrian Paradise has now been identified as one of the fundamental architectural miscalculations of the 20th Century. The emphasis on universality and the creation of community through the imposition of idealistic architectural devices is symptomatic of governmental strategies of the time that reified the idea of 'the social' into architectural form. The effect was such that the appropriation of 'the social' was robbed of its cultural function¹ and instead imposed through a collective articulation of community interaction.

In tracing the internal tensions of 'the social' and the forces and networks that governed its transformations, Nicholas Rose contends that 'the social' may be giving way to 'the community' as a new territory for the 'administration of individual and collective existence.'² To demonstrate how 'the social' transformed into 'the community' within the context of post war social housing in the UK, I would like to provide a critique of the management and governmental strategies deployed within the Market Estate.

Management and governmental strategies

In the hey-day of the council housing construction boom and through the initial years of operation, social housing (including the Market Estate) was managed at a local council level. As the housing estates aged and declined through the late 1970's and early 1980's they became increasingly difficult to manage. To counteract the difficulties faced, the Thatcher government introduced the 'Right to Buy Scheme' offering tenants the opportunity to buy their homes at less than the market price,

sometimes with a discount of up to 70% relative to the amount of time they had lived there. Councils were prevented from spending the proceeds of sales on new homes and were actively discouraged from allocating budgets to existing estates in dire need of refurbishment. Such was the case that desirable homes were bought up by those in financially appropriate positions. The result was that less desirable housing, such as the Market Estate, fell further into disrepair, further marginalising the remaining residents as those with choices moved on.

After the Broadwater Farm riot in 1985, governments and councils realized they had lost control of a vast number of estates and attempted to intervene by injecting a multi-million pound regeneration scheme. Implemented in the early years of the 1990's, the refurbishment and re-modelling of housing did have a positive impact in several locations though others, including the Market Estate, were immune to such interventions and continued to spiral into decline.

In 2000, a young boy was crushed when a security door in the Market Estate fell on him. The tragic death compelled the tenants to set up the Market Estate Tenants and Residents Association (METRA). This began the lengthy campaign for total redevelopment. By 2001, the Islington Council decided they were no longer able to manage the estate, resolving defeat, and handed the management over to Hyde Northside Housing Association. New management on the estate had little effect. Lacking the funding required for redevelopment and under pressure from METRA residents, Islington Council transferred the housing stock to Southern Housing Association to redevelop the site after years of negotiations.

In tracing the shifting trajectory of management strategies from that of central government to the residents themselves and onto housing associations, we notice a parallel to the systematic dismantling of the welfare state carried out across all sectors during this time. It was replaced by 'the introduction of new forms of management into the civil service modeled upon an image of methods in the private sector, new contractual relationships between agencies and service providers and between professionals and clients, a new emphasis on the personal responsibilities of individuals, their families and their communities, for their own future well-being and upon their own obligation to take steps to secure this.'³ In observing such a transformation in language where 'the social' is dismantled and reorganized from within to be redeployed as 'the community' suggests that the 'form of power that this language exercised has now been replaced by other forms.'⁴ In an attempt to expand and further articulate the parallels between the transformations of language pertaining to social housing and the forces and networks that govern its transformations, I would like to introduce Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature.'

MINOR LITERATURE

Published in 1975 under the title of *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari establish the concept of minor literature through an examination of the writings of the Czech author Franz Kafka. Deleuze and Guattari begin by pointing out limitations in conventional interpretations of Kafka's writings most often cited for their symbolic, metaphorical and allegorical associations. Suggesting these dominant modes of literary analysis lead to misinterpretation, Deleuze and Guattari write that in relating 'Kafka's work to a structure with preformed formal oppositions and a signifier is to the detriment of all the political, ethical and ideological dimensions of the work.'⁵ Instead, Deleuze and Guattari offer an alternate method of analysis termed 'minor literature'. This theoretical proposition is exemplified through an interpretation of Kafka's writings that put aside symbolism and signification, instead turning our attention to the unconventional assemblage of linguistic elements and 'intentional use of ambiguous terms or words that have several meanings.'⁶

In identifying these literary constructs, Deleuze and Guattari suggest an intensity of expression in the ability of Kafka's language to disorganize its own forms. It is important to emphasize, this process of minor literature, 'is not dialectic, it does not occur elsewhere or apart from the construct of language itself, on the contrary it operates from within, using the same linguistic elements, but in a different manner.'⁷ Deleuze and Guattari propose three defining characteristics of minor literature ; the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.⁸ Whilst the three characteristics of minor literature are relevant to an analysis of language within social housing, it is the extended notion in which the study of language 'can account for the social factors, relations of force and diverse centers of power'⁹ that I wish to emphasize. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the study of language through a minor literature allows language to escape 'from the informational myth in order to evaluate the hierarchic and imperative system of language as a transmission of orders, an exercise of power.'¹⁰

Whilst there are marked contextual differences between the analysis of literature and that of the study of language pertaining to social housing, the over arching intention and principles of methodology remain constant: namely the ability to apprehend and reveal 'political, ethical and ideological dimensions'¹¹ masked within established forms. In introducing the concept of minor literature within an analysis of social housing, it is important to clarify that it is not the specifics of literature with which we are concerned, instead it is the tools of analysis exemplified by, and enacted upon Kafka's writings. According to Deleuze and Guattari; 'it is a matter of defining a space, a metastable force that does not refer to a subject but designates a vection, a movement of translation that belongs to pre-individual forces.'¹² In adopting minor literature as an operative method for analyzing the relations between language, spatial production and contemporary arts practice within the context of post war social housing in the UK, it is these 'pre-individual forces' which designate spatial transformations within social housing that I am interested in revealing.

Contemporary Art : A minor practice

Taking Rachel Whiteread's *House* as an exemplar, I will now show how the concept of a minor literature might be used as an analytical framework in further understanding a form of contemporary art practice situated within obsolete housing estates. In 1993, Whiteread adopted a soon to be demolished council house in Grove Road, Bow. Backed by Art Angel, the project involved spraying the interior with concrete, removing the exterior building fabric resulting in a monumental negative cast. By virtue of the work being located and clearly visible in the public realm, *House* provoked unforeseen public interest from art practitioners to councillors, cab drivers and to columnists. Even the artist herself was shocked by the public response; 'I knew it would be controversial, but I had no idea how controversial, people seem completely involved in it, and come from all over Britain and beyond to come see it, I can't come to terms with the way people are flocking there'.¹³ In executing *House*, Whiteread placed the vernacular object of the domestic dwelling at the centre of public attention. By manifesting a shift to negative spatial representation in the form of a concrete cast, the work gives presence to the tangible realm of lived experience. The specifics of site and house are inadmissible as anything but relational in the field in which it is located. In adopting a council building highly visible in the public sphere, *House* became a catalyst for public debate raising such issues as the shortage and privatization of public housing. This ability of *House* to engage and provoke public debate suggests contemporary art situated within buildings slated for demolition, operate in a domain that transgresses 'the limits of art and architecture to engage with both the social and the aesthetic.'

The majority of Whiteread's negative cast works are tailored for gallery institutions becoming sculptural collectors items of great value. Conversely, *House* was conceived with the final act of

demolition intended to complete the work. It seems ironic and somewhat contradictory to the artists intent that the chairman of the Arts Council attempted to put a preservation order on the work. Instead the sculptures erasure, provides credibility and sensibility to highlight the transformation of social housing in relation to the demands for privatization and the systematic dismantling of the welfare state.

Situated in the same realm as Whiteread's *House*, in 2009 artist Roger Hiorns intervened within a soon to be demolished 1960's council flat in Elephant and Castle to produce a project titled *Seizure*. The ground floor bed-sit was first tanked with steel panels then filled with a copper sulphate solution. After a week, the chemical solution was drained from the space, leaving the interior encased in blue crystals. In re-contextualising the architectural typology via the encrustation of the copper sulphate crystals, Hiorns deterritorialises the language of social housing to reveal 'political, ethical and ideological dimensions'.¹⁴ Despite the loaded context into which Hiorns inserted the art work Hiorns asserts that the site for the works is not important. In arguing otherwise, even if the artist's intention was to remain within the realm of phenomenology and aesthetics it is irresponsible to assume the work can be read independent of the context in which it is situated. Unlike Whiteread, Hiorns shies away from the extended implications the intervention implies. Like all effective art works, the multiple registers which the work implies can, and should be, celebrated in the extended field of site-specific installation. The ability of the work to connect with the public sphere via an engagement with the social context in which it is situated should be seen as a positive by-product rather than a hindrance to formalist aesthetic concerns. This examination of Whiteread's *House* and Hiorns *Seizure*, situate a field of practice in which contemporary art is implemented within council estates scheduled for demolition. Reliant upon this final act of erasure, these works act on both the symbolic and sensorial to reach wide public audiences to demonstrate the agency of this form or critical spatial practice is tied to stimulating public debate.

THE MARKET ESTATE PROJECT

In 2009, came an opportunity to further test and explore this field of practice through selection within the Market Estate Project. Coordinated by artists collaborative TallTales, backed by the Southern Housing Association and financed by the British Arts Council, The Market Estate Project called for site specific artworks that celebrated a colorful and rich last memory of the estate. In the developing a proposal to take part in the project, preliminary research led to a large body of media publications which traced the Market Estate from its optimistic conception in 1963, through its blighted operational existence and ending in its scheduled demolition in 2009. Throughout the media coverage was a consistency in labeling the estate as violent, criminal and degenerative.

A comparative study was conducted between the accuracy of the medias portrayal and that of long term residents. On the one hand the articles reflected the residents initial optimism with which the estate was occupied but then changed tune to reflect the rising tide of vandalism and crime. On the other hand there is an almost self-perpetuating, disproportionate increase in media and political attention throughout the 1980's as the ageing housing stock began to deteriorate. This inconsistency points towards the salability of negative media coverage that insisted on a continuous barrage of disparaging commentary. Whether accurate or embellished, the media spotlight sharpened public attention constituting the fertility of estate grounds on which to direct political campaigning. The increased importance of social housing in determining government is exemplified by the strategies used by prime ministers, such as Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair, of holding press conferences and public addresses from within council estate grounds. Yet despite the various changes in government and policies, evidence suggests that the longevity implicit in the volatility of

the estates was maintained and exploited. In concretizing the negative associations attributed to social housing, politicians and media have collectively continued to plant the seeds of unrest in order to harvest the benefits of increased public interest. Adopting the media headlines as an instrument with which to describe the exchange between language and spatial production, a proposal was developed for The Market Estate Project titled *Embodied Text*.

Embodied Text

Located on the fourth floor corridor of the Tamworth building and measuring two and half meters high by two and half meters wide and eighty meters long, each of the media headlines were transcribed onto the building fabric using one meter high stencils. Letter by letter the words of headlines, slogans and policy jargon were stenciled into the corridor. The cramped proximity of the corridor combined with the scale of the lettering ensured that the language was not immediately legible. Only by moving along the corridor and shifting the position of the viewer could the headlines be read.

The decision to install the work within a corridor was informed by the events and problems associated with the ambiguous common spaces, such as the corridor, whose ownership had never been resolved in the original concept.¹⁵ This ambiguity between public and private space was a product of the excessive emphasis on pedestrian mobility by incorporating interlocking corridors, sky bridges and multiple entry points in the building's design. Problems associated with such spatial definition, delegates the corridor as a site of contention implicit in the history of events in social housing. In an exploration of the relations between the external influence of language upon the estate and its residents, the blurred distinction between public and private space within the corridor is contextually and spatially relevant to such an exploration.



Figure 2. Installing 'Embodied Text'

Having transferred the language of media and policy across the corridor, each letter was then inscribed into the building fabric. Beginning with the flooring, a knife was used to score the perimeter of each letter, removing the corresponding vinyl as though etching into the concrete below. The text on the walls was inscribed using a circular saw, cutting through and removing timber balustrades, architraves and skirting boards. Text across timber doors was cut open to reveal the inner sanctums

of the flats, redefining the relationship between the public space of the corridor and that of the private dwellings.



Figure 3. Detail of 'Embodied Text'

On the 6th of March 2010, an open day brought more than two thousand five hundred inquisitive people through the dilapidated estate. Whilst the residents seemed confused at the allocation of public money to an artists initiative deemed for landfill, the media labelled the event a grand success writing; 'the project is a success, the sheer epic scale of the thing and the ambition of its creators is infectious. And it is a fitting end for a building constructed as a flag for a better era, but which came to be a negative symbol.'¹⁶



Figure 4. Demolition of The Market Estate revealing 'Embodied Text'

After the fanfare of the open day, the demolition began and *Embodied Text* began a transformation of its own. The initial process of demolition involved removing any material deemed valuable enough to salvage. This process saw the removal of all doors, windows, metal ceilings and copper wiring, opening the corridor to the elements. With only the flooring and painted letters remaining, the second phase saw the buildings emptied of all but concrete and brick. The final phase saw the concrete and brick structure gradually dismantled. During this final phase the text became legible in its entirety, the urban scale of the language inscribed could be read clearly from a distance. Having since been turned to rubble and disappeared, *Embodied Text* suggests that the agency of contemporary art implemented within housing estates is reliant its erasure to reveal the entangled relations between language and spatial production. Through this transformation and erasure of the building fabric, architectural language is deterritorialised to reveal political, social and environmental attributes masked within established forms



Figure 5. Detail of 'Embodied Text' during demolition

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through this examination of the relations between language, spatial production and contemporary arts practice, this research highlights the myriad of complex networks, forces and vectors operating within the field of social housing. By adapting Deleuze and Guattaris concept of minor literature as a method to analyze contemporary arts practice situated in council estates scheduled for demolition, I have traced the transformation of language across both literary and aesthetic domains to reveal the dynamic relations between architecture, media and politics.

On the one hand the literary analysis of media coverage reveals distinct shifts in key terminology in which 'the social' was dismantled and reorganized from within to be redeployed as 'the community.' Simultaneous to the co-opting of key terminology by government agencies is the systematic dismantling of the welfare state in which the bulk of social housing in the UK was privatized through the right to buy scheme or handed over to private construction companies for demolition and redevelopment. In singling out the events that took place in and around the Market Estate reinforce the inseparability of language and spatial production that can be read as a historical syntax in which social forces redistributed the built environment leading to the demolition of the estate as a way of re-writing council housing. In re-appraising the links between the transformation of language and the

authority of governance demonstrates parallels between semantic transformation and the forces and networks that govern its transformations.

Parallel with literary analysis we have examined three contemporary art works situated in council estates scheduled for demolition. Rachael Whiteread's House, Roger Hiorns Seizure and my own Embodied Text all reveal a form of critical spatial practice in which the transformation of architectural language through site specific art works implemented within housing estates suggest an agency in which language is deterritorialized to reveal political, social and environmental attributes masked within established forms. At the center of each of the projects is the provocation of an obsolete building type in which pressures of privatization have deemed its former use outmoded and deemed for demolition. In the fleeting space between redundancy and demolition, these interventions establish new relationships between the public and the urban fabric allowing for direct public input and influence upon the production and interpretation of the works. Offering an explanation of such spatial acrobatics, Jane Rendell writes; 'social relations of production are both space forming and space contingent. It is not simply that space is produced, but that social relations are spatially produced'¹⁷. This dialectic interactivity between social and architectural spatial formation infer a dynamic connectivity between people and the urban realm in which the architectural language of the built environment is transformed to reveal and produce moments of social, cultural and political significance. Unearthed in such a cyclical proposition is the ability of language to produce space and space to produce language echoing Henri Lefebvre's contention 'that space and the political organization of space, expresses social relationships but also react back upon them.'¹⁸

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