

The Social Condenser: again, again and again: the case for the Narkomfin Communal House, Moscow.

The Narkomfin Communal House is the archetypal ‘social condenser’. It was first constructed as an exemplary form – as a prototype for all housing for the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1929–30. Designed by the constructivist architect Moisei Ginzburg with Ignatii Milinius it was commissioned by the visionary town planner and Peoples Commissar of Finance of the Russian Republic, Nikolai Miliutin. As such it represents one of the most complete architectural realisations of the Russian Revolutionary avant-garde designed to enable the transition from bourgeois capitalism to socialism and then on to a fully fledged communist society through the edifying effects of its architectural forms (Buchli 1999). Such forms were imagined to literally transform Soviet citizens into revolutionary communards and enable the transition of Soviet society into the next level of social evolution as envisioned by the unilineal evolutionary beliefs of the early Soviet state. This would be done through one’s interaction with architectural forms, their textures, materials and spatial configurations to produce a new form of social life and with it a new form of revolutionary social consciousness. As the sloganeering of the time went, ‘*bytie opredeliaet soznanie*’ (material being determines consciousness) and this ‘social condenser’ was the most complete of attempts by the early Soviet state to reconfigure daily life and its affective intimacies towards the production of a new consciousness and new form of social life. As an avant-garde and social project it was astonishingly shortlived, despite the resources – intellectual, political and material – that were devoted to it. Within a few short years it shifted from being the vanguard of the future to an atavistic and awkward relic of the avant-garde past as Stalinism and Socialist Realism took hold, changing the terms by which the promise of Socialism was to be experienced and realised.¹ In this respect it ‘failed’ most spectacularly depending on one’s particular political point of view and how one envisioned the future of the socialist revolution and the role of the avant-garde both in the Soviet Union and the West. However, its impact was emphatically enduring, as the collection of these papers on the ‘social condenser’ attest. It is this endurance which I want to consider here, particularly in relation to its repeated ‘failures’. Here this discussion will build upon recent work within anthropology and the productive capacity of failure per se as developed by Carroll et al. (2017)

¹ Please see Cohen 1992, Buchli 1999, Groys 1992, Cooke 1995.

However, in relation to the discussions here of the concept of the ‘social condenser’, I want to suggest a different approach to how we understand built form in light of these recent ethnographic reassessments of ‘failure’ (Carroll et al. 2017); not so much in terms of its ‘success’, which is always fleeting and changing, but in terms of how it fails. And, to paraphrase Judith Halberstam citing Samuel Beckett, how it might ‘fail well’ (2011). Specifically I am interested in how the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ might be understood as a ‘failure’, but an extraordinarily productive one – with apologies to all those who support the values it represents (values to which I have always been profoundly drawn and have upheld as the reader I hope may permit me to avow). More importantly, in this discussion I want to consider the inevitable ‘failure’ in general of all built forms as a general condition, which subsequent to the vicissitudes of time, social and political change and material decay inevitably do fail, but which, fail in inherently productive ways which I would like to argue are counter-intuitively highly successful in terms of their social and productive capacities. In fact, much of my earlier work on the Narkomfin (Buchli 1999) was mired in this understanding of failure in terms of how the avant-garde political project which it represented, was understood within conventional domination and resistance paradigms. Rather I want to speak here to the way these enduring, and recurring ‘failures’ of the avant-garde project are actually productive and in fact preserve the social and political promise of the building’s author, namely Moisei Ginzburg and the extended milieu of the Soviet avant-garde, almost indefinitely and within new and unexpectedly productive material registers.

Here I am informed by more recent work within the social sciences and in anthropology, particularly as they relate to the study of architectural form (see Buchli 2013 for a wide ranging discussion) which attempts to resist the nineteenth-century fetish of coherent built form and its meanings, and attempts instead to understand the many iterations of its meanings. As such, this discussion attempts to take on board the anthropologist Alfred Gell’s contention, formulated in his magisterial discussion of the Maori meeting house (2015), that such material forms are momentary iterations within a series of many. As Gell so eloquently described, the meeting house was only one iteration within a series of iterations which spoke to its endurance, not simply in three or four dimensions, but, following Timothy Carroll (2015), in five. Here, the conventional chronological time of four dimensions, in which conventional decay and change could be apperceived, is superseded by the fifth dimension of genealogical time that is as anachronistic, transcendent and enduring. The genealogical entity

of a Maori lineage is given momentary expression in three and four dimensions encompassing change over chronological time, which we can only and partially apprehend as unitary mortal beings, either indigenous or foreign. This was an example of what Gell referred to as ‘extended mind’ and ‘distributed objects’, which resist the phenomenological mortal limits of the apperceiving subject, but which suggest a dimension of cognition, time and productive effect which is beyond the individual thinking subject or even its immediate community. There is of course the glimmer of a Kantian sensibility in terms of the noumenal and phenomenal, as in Riviere’s account of Ye’cuana dwellings, where ‘the visible house with its transient existence is less important in terms of societal continuity than the invisible counterpart’ (Riviere 1995: 201-2). As Riviere further notes: ‘Settlements are the visible but ephemeral evidence of an invisible continuity’ (Riviere 1995: 201-2). But I want to resist this Kantian slippage and argue instead following others (Halberstam 2011, Povinelli 2011, Yftachel 2009) that such iterations are productive in a manner that might be considered even bolder, more generative, destabilizing and yet astonishingly inventive rather than the faint phenomenal iterations of eternal noumenal forms.

By considering the iterations of built form and their necessarily productive ‘failure’, the status of the ‘social condenser’ might be seen less an agonistic failure in the conventional sense and more of a productive process that in fact ensures the astonishing longevity and persistence of the ‘social condenser’. Rather I want to consider its astonishing productive work within a wider series of iterations as ‘extended mind’ and ‘distributed object’, in Gell’s terms; or as the literary theorist Sarah Dillon suggests, in terms of the radically productive work of ‘palimpsestuousness’ (2007). As her felicitous neologism suggests such ‘palimpsestuousness’ is transgressive and productive and must be understood in terms of the totality of constantly shifting and realigning iterations over time as the critical unit of analysis. Here I propose to consider the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ as just such a ‘distributed object’ (Gell) or ‘palimpsestuous’ entity (Dillon 2007). To focus on one inevitably decaying and unstable form (its iteration as idealised plan, its iteration as built form, or any of the other iterations in the past, present and future) is to miss the point. And in the case of the ‘social condenser’ it is to miss the point as regards its remarkable persistence and social efficacy.

Within Dillon’s neologism, the ‘palimpsestuous’ also speaks to the failure of a given iteration as the material condition by which the radically productive social relationality of

‘palimpsestuousness’ arises. The palimpsest, historically, is produced through an erasure but one that is always imperfect. This seemingly obscure understanding is actually highly material in its essence, and this materiality is at the heart of enabling its socially productive power: ‘...its ghostly trace then reappeared in the following centuries as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air producing a reddish-brown oxide’ (Dillon 2007: 12). Thus, ‘rather than erasing ancient texts, the practise of medieval palimpsesting in fact paradoxically preserved them for posterity.’ (Dillon 2007: 12) as a consequence of these unexpected material attributes and affordances. Thus palimpsestuousness is a radical relationality, one that produces a ‘unity’ that is ‘irreducible with respect to it and only in fact thinkable out of it’ (Dillon 2007: 43). Thus Dillon argues with reference to Judith Butler on the Queer, that ‘The concept of the palimpsest is not only determined by, but structurally *embodies*, this historicity of critical terms *and* their perpetual openness to critical and imaginative reinscription – an openness that is necessary for the exposure, affirmation and reworking of that historicity, as well as for their present and future effectivity.’ (Dillon 2007: 125)

As the literary critics David Eng and David Kazanjian note in their Benjaminian meditation on melancholy, also invoking the principle of the palimpsest: ‘By engaging in “countless separate struggles” with loss, melancholia might be said to constitute, as Benjamin would describe it, an ongoing and open relationship with the past – bringing its ghosts and spectres, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present.’ (Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 4). As they further observe in relation to the productive value of melancholic refusal:

The ability of the melancholic object to express multiple losses at once speaks to its flexibility as a signifier, endowing it with not only multiple facets but also a certain palimpsest-like quality. This condensation of meaning allows us to understand the lost object as continually shifting both spatially and temporally, adopting new perspectives and meanings, new social and political consequences, along the way. (Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 5).

Thus such a melancholic disposition is not pathological (contra Freud), but redemptive and in fact prospective: ‘... the very process of narrativizing loss orients an impulse toward the future’ (Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 13). It is crucial to note this continuous ‘shifting both spatially and temporally’ (Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 5) and the various registers in which the

Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ is iterated and then obliterated; but whose protean, constantly evolving totality produces a position outside history and outside embodied memory with which to imagine an alternative other. The Narkomfin simply must ‘fail’ in order for it to continue to enable its redemptive potential and engender new and unexpected communities of affect and action. But for this one needs to abandon the notion of coherent built form and meaning, which inevitably always decays and is unstable, and consider how that inherent instability is profoundly productive. Susan Buck-Morrs made a related point in relation to the fragmented historical methodology of Benjamin’s own ruminations in the Arcades project, whose fragmentary forms are at once a testimony to loss but also a method whose productive and social power is precisely due to its unstable ‘failing’ forms. As she notes:

The moment of sublation reveals itself visually, in an instantaneous flash wherein the old is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance. This fleeting image of truth ‘is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does it justice...The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization becomes proof, rather of its transiency. And the fleetingness of temporal power does not cause sadness; it informs political practise. (Buck-Morrs 2002: 170)

The protean power of Benjamin’s work is due, I would like to insist, to the affordances of its material form, a collection of notes compiled according to alphabetised ‘files’ or ‘convolutes’ (Eiland and McLaughlin 2002: xiv) producing “‘a world of secret affinities”, and each separate article in the collection, each entry, as to constitute a “magic encyclopaedia” of the epoch from which it derived.’ (Eiland and McLaughlin 2002: x). Benjamin’s work generates a constantly shifting montage from where

Citation and commentary might then be perceived as intersecting at a thousand different angles, setting up vibrations across epochs of recent history, so as to effect ‘the cracking open of natural teleology.’ And all this would unfold through the medium of hints or ‘blinks’ – a discontinuous presentation deliberately opposed to traditional modes of argument. (Eiland and McLaughlin 2002:xi).

As Bruno Latour once quipped regarding the affordances and unexpected productive capacities of paper and filing systems, ‘Levi-Strauss’s theories of savages are an artifact of

card indexing at the College de France...’ (Latour 1986: 19). And similarly Buck-Morss would write: ‘The *Passagen-Werk* was to be a “materialist philosophy of history,” constructed with “the utmost concreteness” out of the historical material itself...’ (Buck-Morss 1989: 3). It is the textures of these various material registers that produce the affective communities at play in the many erasures and iterations of the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ in its protean totality over time and space.

In relation to these observations I would like to offer a few examples from within anthropological archaeology and its deep time perspective, which would have relevance for the near century of the ‘social condenser’s’ existence. As mentioned before, Gell’s discussion of the Maori meeting house argues for the totality of iterations of the meeting house over time and space that is its coherent meaningful scale of apperception. Similarly, Riviere (1995), describes the houses of the Ye’cuana settlements as being rebuilt every six years, oftentimes upon the death of an elder, the reconstruction of which renews the community and its relations in the apparent ‘failure’ of the settlement in the wake of misfortune. At the same time, the reconstruction causes the renewal of those relations despite the fact that the dwellings themselves, as Riviere observes, are not in fact most often materially decayed or unstable. Each new iteration of the Ye’cuana dwelling invokes the mythical ancestor of the lineage whose otherworldly dwelling is indexed by the local mountain, where the ancestor is believed to reside.

Dusan Boric (2002), in discussing the Mesolithic and early Neolithic dwellings of Lepenski Vir observes the constant rebuilding of dwellings on top of one another, citing as he notes, the earlier hearths below in a complex palimpsest of iterations of the dwelling over time. Boric argues that this constant iteration of the same form in the same place over centuries is done for apotropaic reasons to invoke the protection of the ancestors, whose mythical dwelling is indexed by the neighbouring mountain. The mountain-dwelling’s trapezoidal form is repeated in the floor plans of the earthly dwelling and indexed through their continuous repetition over centuries.

Or, as I have discussed elsewhere, the early Neolithic dwellings of CatalHoyuk are constantly reconstructed over time in the same place, in the same form. Their repetition over time indexes the enduring power of sublime substances sustaining social life, but when circumstances change with intensification the power of those associations is repeated in other

media such as ceramics, when built form no longer is able to sustain those associations in more extensive conditions (Buchli 2014). In short, in the context of CatalHoyuk, the traditional architectonics of dwelling as conventionally understood simply cease being socially effective at constituting larger order social relations within an expanding Neolithic economy, population and more extensively populated landscape. Skilfully crafted structures composed of high quality brickwork are replaced later by shoddily made bricks. In turn, earlier shoddy ceramics are replaced in later centuries by finely produced ones. When conventional architectonics fail to provide the necessary material terms by which social cohesion is produced, finely made ceramics do the job that 'dwellings' once did to integrate members of society.

More recently, archaeologists have noted in relation to the Berlin Wall, how unstable, incoherent architectural forms, that from a more conventional perspective are 'failed', are understood in all their various states as enabling 'dissensus' rather than 'consensus'. This dissensus is seen to be inherently productive due to its ability to secure an 'outside' to any given narrative of history and memory. This is evident in G. Dolf-Bonekaemper's (2002) discussion of the Berlin Wall and its fragments as a 'lieu de discord', where she comments on how different sections of the wall in different states of preservation and decay produce a multiplicity of 'sites of dispute'. As Dolf-Bonekaemper observes:

It allows one to make a difference between consensual and dissensual situations and to accept a monument's capacity to create dissensus – or to make it visible – as a positive quality, a social value. A monument is argued about and becomes precious because it does not embody cultural and social consensus or historic or present events. (Dolf-Bonekaemper 2002: 247).

But Dolf-Boenekamper is keen to insist that preservation practices uphold the inherent ambivalence of the wall's remains in different states of preservation and material register as an end in itself. An end constituted by the political and interpretive goal to 'preserve' these various iterations as 'sites of dispute', enabling continuous historical work and memory practices with material forms that would sustain these constantly evolving and productive forms – inhibiting any consensus or settlement and facilitating constantly unfolding 'dissensus' (Buchli 2013).

In terms of plan, the original Narkomfin floor plan can be seen to be an echo of the Iroquois Long house and the communal forms of matriarchal society asserted by Lewis Henry Morgan in 1877 – a point that later Soviet town planners in the 1960s drew out (see Gradov 1968). Not unlike the reiteration of floor plans that produce the apotropaic protection of ancestors as in Dusan Boris's discussion of Lepenskii Vir, nor unlike the manner of Taussig's material conditions of mimesis where superficial form suffices to capture the power that mimetic actions in various registers attempt to harness (Taussig: 1993), the reiteration of these communal patterns secure social justice and a new society in the present. Without fail every iteration results in a loss – a 'failure' from the perspective of the preceding iteration: 'The translator is a betrayer' (Jakobson 1966: 238, see also Rosman and Rubel 2003: 4), and without question, each iteration is a betrayer – but of 'what values?' (Jakobson 1966: 238) as the linguist Roman Jakobson questions. The linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein also notes that translation and its subsequent iterations can be understood as Caldenby describes it as a 'translatory motion' (Caldenby 2014) akin to the notion of 'transduction' within physics, which always implies a fundamental loss, but this loss is what renders this 'motion' productive (Silverstein 2003: 83–84) and which in turn produces 'ownership' and the authority of the given iteration (Silverstein 2003: 92). This is an authority which is always produced at the cost of the preceding iteration, (Silverstein 2003: 88, 91–95) but it also produces the conditions by which a given and novel relationality becomes possible.

The power of these formal qualities related to the semantic authority of orthogonal forms of representation can be seen in Helliwel's own frustration with such 'long house' forms as she grapples with and disproves this authority in her discussion of Dayak Longhouses. Helliwel attributes the hold of these semantic orthogonal properties to a privileging of the visual in western systems of knowledge. The apotropaic qualities of orthogonal forms transducing three dimensional walls in whatever media to line and those very same lines in turn denote very particular forms of social organisation. As Helliwel observes with frustration, these forms insist on specific understandings of social organisation based on visually apperceived floor plans: 'Here, the building blocks of society are described not simply as if they resemble dwellings, but as if they were *constituted* [emphasis in the original] by the dwellings which apparently divide members of the community up into tidy social units' (Helliwel 1996: 130) This decidedly and seemingly unmodern impulse to believe in the apotropaic qualities of orthogonal forms to secure certain social forms in a visualist register is remarkably stubborn in the most modernist analyses of architectural form as Helliwel's discussion suggests, as do

the wildly diverse examples of Boric (Mesolithic Balkans), Riviere (twentieth-century south America) and Gradov (twentieth-century Soviet Russia). That such visualist forms should secure continuity and novel forms of collectivity is well attested to in Marcel Mauss's own incredulity regarding beliefs that emphasise visual qualities of architectural forms that secure national borders and produce social collectives such as ethnic national groups: that 'such and such nations should extend here or there, on the grounds that we can still find there such or such shape of house' (Mauss 2006: 43).

As such the Narkomfin as 'social condenser' was heralded as the blueprint for all housing for the Soviet Union on the basis of these orthogonal forms thereby securing the revolutionary promise of the Soviet avant-garde. In fact the Narkomfin as built was a fragment of the wider type of linear cities that were proposed to replace feudal and bourgeois conurbations with an electrified gridded network of settlements spreading over the Soviet Union (and ideally beyond, following the then-expected victory of global communism over capitalism). As is well known, however, the programme of the Soviet avant-garde and the constructivists gave way to the more conventional, classically inspired and grandiose urban plans of Stalinism. The social life these forms were envisaged to secure and propagate however found themselves reiterated by Le Corbusier, who upon visiting the Narkomfin shortly after construction and being gifted the plans of the building reiterated the innovative corridor plan and F-type unit typology in his post-war *Unite d'Habitation* schemes. Thereby, in turn, they became the blueprint for post-war social housing across Europe, and with it the hopes for the apotropaic qualities of these orthogonal forms to transform society and produce desired collectivities.

In the postwar period in the aftermath of Stalin's death and the Khrushchev Thaw, the Narkomfin and the ideals of the 'social condenser' it embodied were revived. This was not only in effect at the Narkomfin itself, where the buildings and social programme of the Soviet avant-garde were forcefully being reactivated (see Buchli 1999). But the Narkomfin 'social condenser' served as a model for post-war post-Stalinist architects of the Khrushchev era and afterwards – notably Osterman's 'Lebed' complex in Moscow and the wider development of mass social housing in the post-war period (Buchli 1999).

In the late socialist and post-socialist period, the Narkomfin 'social condenser' has been reiterated in a new context. In both Western and Eastern Europe but in particular in the West

it assumed the status of an art object. In the post-war period the Narkomfin became a study of pure form in terms of the realisation of its social programme, a rarefied aestheticized object, decontextualized as an object of formal contemplation divorced ultimately from the landscape and wider social and political milieu in which it emerged. This in turn saved it from complicity with the rise of Stalinist totalitarianism. Nevertheless, as the biographies of the architects and planners attest, the avant-garde was intimately implicated in the rise of totalitarianism as Boris Groys (1992) has long asserted, despite Western art historical attempts to purify it of its complicity.

Others such as Manfredo Tafuri (1976), saw this complicity with the rise of totalitarianism, and perceived such forms as a failure of these aspirations within the industrialised modernist and technocratic rise of Soviet totalitarianism. The Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ was a fragment of an unrealisable utopian vision. Much like the fragments of Piranesi, such projects in their eminently failed forms served as fragments with which to reimagine new forms of social and urban life. But similarly such fragments also served, in Tafuri’s analysis, above all as aestheticized art objects for circulation within capitalist economies. Tafuri’s despondent resignation at the eventual commodification of such fragments left little hope for the redemptive potential of such iterations in fragmented and ‘failed’ form as a promise for the renewal of social life. Tafuri discusses ‘Piranesi’s excess’ in Piranesi’s image of the Campo Marzio (Tafuri 1976: 16), as an excess where:

It is in the city that these fragments are pitilessly absorbed and deprived of any autonomy, and this situation cannot be reversed by obstinately forcing fragments to assume articulated, composite configurations. In the Campo Marzio we witness an epic representation of the battle waged by architecture against itself ... This colossal piece of bricolage conveys nothing but a self-evident truth: irrational and rational are no longer to be mutually exclusive’ (Tafuri 1976: 14-15).

Thus, as Tafuri notes, ‘The “loss” foretold by Piranesi has now become tragic reality. The experience of the ‘tragic’ is the experience of the metropolis.’ (Tafuri 1976: 78) Here the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ marooned as a fragment in the Stalinist, then late socialist and now capitalist cityscape of Moscow, sits like the Piranesian fragments of other such utopian visions, whereby ‘Urban approximations and the ideologies of the plan appear as old idols, to be sold off to collectors of antique relics’ (Tafuri 1976: 170). And indeed, as the latest reports

indicate, the city of Moscow is planning hold an auction in August 2016, to sell off the property to the highest bidder for preservation and redevelopment, possibly as a luxury hotel (*Department Gorodo Moskvyy po Konkurentnoi Politike*, 20.06.2016). Tafuri's citation of James Rosenquist's interview in the *Partisan Review*, is prescient of this contemporary condition: '... the fragment even now or at least in the near future may be just a vacant aluminum panel whereas in an earlier period it may have been a fancy cornice or something seemingly more human' (cited in Tafuri 1976: 143). And with reference to Yamasaki's World Trade Center: 'Even these works, according to Rosenquist's metaphor, are fragments that cannot permit themselves to be other than 'a vacant aluminum panel' for disenchanted collectors.' (Tafuri 1976: 145). The recent successes within the secondary market at auction of the fragments of Jean Prouvé's own architectural fragments from his innovative architectural projects – the wall panels, doors, and so on – attest to the bleak predictions of Tafuri (1976) several decades earlier, as will likely be demonstrated by the auction and sale of the Narkomfin 'social condenser' as a luxury object of some form in post-socialist capitalist Moscow.

The abject condition of Piranesian excess identified by Tafuri, however, does suggest a redemptive potential as the reiteration of these forms in various media and registers suggest. From one perspective such reiterations of form, might merely suggest the conditions under which semiosis transpires, as described by Derrida in relation to his notion of 'differance' (1976). However, I would like propose in relation to the iterative, fragmentary and failed form of the 'social condenser' as embodied by the Narkomfin, that such 'failure' cannot only be perceived from the one vantage point that privileges the perfectibility of a given form. As Dillon suggests in relation to the palimpsest, the fetishisation of the perfectibility of signification ignores the larger productive scale in which palimpsestuousness works.

In a more nihilistic turn, Halberstam goes one further than Tafuri. He argues against Tafuri's despondency and in fact embraces the absolute productive capacity of 'failure' in terms of the absolute refusal of signification and the many turns by which all revolutionary acts are doomed to appropriation and co-option, without the possibility of a critical political outside. The solution in Halberstam's schema is to embrace 'failure' as a productive and revolutionary refusal contra Tafuri – that repeated 'failure' is the only condition whereby settlements of power can ever be negated, refused and critically refuted. This is what Halberstam refers to as the 'refusal of mastery' (Halberstam 2011: 11) and what she further

refers to as a refusal of 'memory': '... forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.'

(Halberstam 2011: 15). This, in short, as she advocates, is '... about failing well, failing often and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better.' (Halberstam 2011: 24)

Halberstam argues for an apparent nihilistic refusal that in its 'failure' promises an alternative space for action. She argues for a kind of feminist and wider radical politics:

'... a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence, [which] offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positive accounts and unravelled their logics from within...' and thereby resists 'patriarchal forms of power' (Halberstam 2011:124). This position refuses any prospect for reincorporation within dominant modes of power like the fragmented panels on offer to collectors, as imagined by Tafuri and as realised in the fragments of Jean Prouve's work – whose architectural panels command enormous prices at auction. Or, indeed, as the soon to be auctioned off Narkomfin (or its fragments and fittings) as well. Halberstam, in this vein, writes, referring to Julia Bryan Wilson's account of Ono's performative art practise and her 'Promise Piece' of 1992:

... where a vase is smashed and its shards handed out, Wilson points out, there is always the possibility, indeed the probability that the fragments of the whole will never be reunited. I would emphasise that this commitment to the fragment over any fantasy of future wholeness, and I want to locate the smashing gestures and the cutting gestures of Ono's work in relation to this other antisocial feminism that refuses conventional modes of femininity by refusing to remake, rebuild, or reproduce and that dedicates itself completely and ferociously to the destruction of self and other. (Halberstam 2011: 138)

Thus within this nihilistic relentless and constant 'failure', the liberatory masochist figure Halberstam invokes 'refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying, and seeks instead to be out of time altogether, a body suspended in time, space and desire.' (Halberstam 2011: 144-45). In short Halberstam proposes an almost apocalyptic totality of mastery, through refusal and negation, that opens a space of continuously emergent resistance.

Elizabeth Povinelli and Oren Yiftachel, however, offer alternative observations regarding the productive power of repeated ‘failure’ that do not assume such apocalyptic nihilistic tones but which are more guardedly hopeful and situated. Povinelli argues for the redemptive power of ‘endurance’, refusing any given settlement of power, with dogged endurance: ‘not this, not that’. Thus, a redemptive alternative is always promised through repeated acts of endurance, that by their nature neither affirm or refuse, and in turn offer an alternative space for social action. Foregrounding the material conditions of ‘endurance’: ‘What appears to be a radically empty gesture (“not this”) is revealed to be a positive act. [] ...continual refusal to collapse under the weight of a thousand mute obstacles (‘not that’) should be understood as a series of quasi-events that provide the preconditions in which some new social content might be nurtured.’ (Povinelli 2011: 191)

Yiftachel, speaks to something like ‘endurance’ (Povinelli 2011) in his invocation of ‘grey space’ whose greyness echoes the indeterminacy of the ‘palimpsestuous’ (Dillon 2007), those spaces that are produced through continuous and constant negation by the powers that be. Here he refers to the ethnocentric policies of Israeli urban planning authorities that do not recognize Bedouin settlements and constantly negate and physically raze them. The consequence of this is that the constant negation and enforced ‘failure’ of given social and material forms, unexpectedly produce new forms of governance and action, that were neither predetermined, nor originally authored, but literally emerged through the sensuous, and embodied processes of destruction/reconstruction/destruction/reconstruction, again and again. The failures and erasures of these forms, as Dillon astutely describes in relation to the empirical material conditions of the palimpsests, are paradoxically productive. But rather than being preservative, as in Dillon’s example, they are actually constitutive of unexpected and new forms of social life. More in keeping with Povinelli’s observations regarding ‘endurance’, Yiftachel notes what his informants describe and know in relation to these processes:

We know this is a long haul, and that this new mosque will probably be followed by further demolitions and legal penalties ... but we also know that the attempts to remove us will never fully succeed, like the failure in burning and resisting Gaza. This is because we are sons of this soil, and we know how to survive on it, and we will ... the state calls us ‘criminals’ just for living in our localities ... this does not

matter, as we'll always remain the people of this place, not for the state, but for our own communal future ... (cited in Yftachel 2009: 253-4)

Yftachel reflects on these processes of destruction/reconstruction/destruction/reconstruction, again and again, and how this highly material, sensuous and traumatizing process has radically productive effects: '... the rise of informal and autonomous leadership 'from below' against an technocratic hard-line policy of denial and forced removal. ... It has thereby gradually institutionalized their long-term future in gray space, while setting the foundations for incipient forms of indigenous sovereignty.' (Yftachel 2009: 253). Thus indigenous forms of authority, power and identity emerge when there were none before echoing a long established trope within Marxian analysis that speaks to the material and sensuous conditions that produce radical forms of consciousness.

It is here where we might consider the 'social condenser' and the Narkomfin again in yet another iteration, to think about how 'failure' produces the conditions whereby new forms of social life might emerge. This is what Owen Hatherley suggests so eloquently in his own examination of the 'social condenser' and the legacy of the Narkomfin, considering the condition of post-war social housing in Britain and how a new iteration that emerges from such failures produces the terms by which to envisage new forms of community and action. The 'new ruins of Great Britain' provide the conditions from which such a critique and a call to action can be formed:

... what of it if the new society never emerged? We have been cheated out of the future, yet the future's ruins lie about us, hidden or ostentatiously rotting. So what would it mean, then, to look for the future's remnants? ... Can we, should we, try and excavate utopia? (Hatherley 2008: 3)

The many iterations of the Narkomfin 'social condenser' within different registers have produced an extraordinary palimpsest of iterations that taken as a whole speak to its extraordinary productive power. The so-called 'failures' of a given iteration, then, are precisely what creates its protean effects: from its given state as a legacy of the modern movement, aestheticized and sanitized from its wider totalitarian context, to its multiple iterations in the Soviet period and in the welfare-era West. The Narkomfin's 'failed' aspects are precisely those which ensure its ability to produce a critical 'outside'.

It is important to take into account the totality of the ‘erasures’ of the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ in all its registers and manifestations to consider its productive work. Taking seriously the materiality of these iterations and how they form in vertical (through material time) and horizontal (across various transductions and reiterations in different registers and cultural and disciplinary contexts) axes new configurations and social possibilities. This is a decidedly complex context, not to be restricted to just one iteration, historical moment, material condition or register, but in terms of the totality of these erasures, iterations and unexpected irruptions. Dillon’s understanding of ‘palimpsestuousness’ allows us to consider the totality of these forms, and their protean effects across time and space and the emergence of incipient forms of life and action that these forms enable. The current manifestation in late capitalist neo-liberal societies both non-Russian and Russian of the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ enable it to function in innovative media and material registers.

In the Russian context, under the conditions of Putinist capitalist neo-nationalism, the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ represents a dystopian rejection of the conditions of Putin’s Russia. Invoking an era of modernist reform, the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ represents a ‘not this, not that’, which invokes the history of Russian town planning and social reform. Unable to adequately stand outside it represents within history an ‘involution’ (to use Jeevedrampillai’s term [2016]). Strelka’s striking re-iteration of the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ at the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2014 (Kalgaev, McGetrick and Paramonova 2014) wryly commented on Putin era property development in a manner befitting the best sort of ‘stioob-like’ over-identifying irony (Yurchak 2005). It invoked the dystopian quality of the Putin present and Russian and Soviet pasts, through images of the famous rooftop solarium as yoga studio to the disused Arcadian park surrounding it as prison exercise yard. Strelka’s provocation thus testifies to this involution (Jeevendrampillai 2016), which might be dismissed as nihilistic as Halberstam’s failure suggests, but which nonetheless produces an ‘involution’ that denies ‘this or that’ (to paraphrase Povinelli 2011).

Seeing the various iterations in their protean palimpsestuous totality, the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’ takes on new productive powers, hitherto unimaginable, but nonetheless well in keeping with its original social mission for enabling a world that is ‘otherwise’ against the settlements of power at anytime and in anyplace. Such a ‘failure’ is indeed remarkable and

one whose productive capacities are indeed proven and enduring – a successful ‘social condenser’ of the highest order.

In short, our fetishisation of form, aesthetic, material and preservationist, might in fact not serve us well when considering the paradoxical yet highly productive work of the multiple iterations and erasures over time in various registers of the Narkomfin ‘social condenser’. As Dillon’s notion of palimpsestuousness suggests it is precisely the totality of these forms and erasures which constitutes the production context for its functioning, as it consolidates various axes of time, space, material register and meaning to effect its productive work; at the same time paying close attention to the specific material registers at play and how they enable various communities of affect and knowledge.

As Taussig notes with regard to mimesis – which can be extended to iterative process in general – such reiterations always harness the power of that which is imitated. The apparent failures of the iterative process are at odds with the power that mimesis attempts to harness: ‘What is transformation, if not mastery over fate’s mastery?’ (Taussig 1999: 242). It is precisely the impossibility of mimetic perfection that assures reproduceability and the continued productivity of each subsequent iteration: what Harpham refers to in another context as the demonic temptation of perfect imitation (Buchli 2015: 42). It is also the particular materiality of these registers and their ‘textures’ that enable specific kinds of sociality and their attendant affective communities. Consider the material texture of Benjamin’s clippings and his method in the Arcades project (Buck-Morss 2000). This is precisely what is productive of this particular contemporary iterative moment that constitutes the specific iterations of the ‘social condenser’ and their ‘textures’ and ‘registers’, that are generative of new affective dispositions and calls for action within contemporary political and economic conditions. But Benjamin elsewhere describes another order of “non-sensuous similarity” as he describes it, related to language itself that functions similarly to create the productive conditions whereby alternative futures might emerge almost magically with the power of clairvoyance at that moment or recognition or ‘flash’ : “The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars” (Benjamin 1979: 66). It is precisely these chains of similarity that emerge suddenly, in a ‘flash’ that emerge within the totality of their palimpsestuousness to suggest ‘clairvoyantly’ powerful new orders of being and where and how the future might be

perceived and sustained. As such, ‘translatory motions’ (Caldenby et al. 2014) produce the conditions whereby wider affective moral bonds such as ‘mercy’ as Derrida observed (see Buchli in Caldenby et al. 2014: 169) would be produced within such ‘flashes’ and the similarities they establish as Benjamin proposed, thereby offering the conditions whereby a powerfully redemptive and moral vision of the future might be envisioned albeit momentarily within that ‘flash’ but then reiterated in new registers and sustained again and again.

It is the cumulative ‘texture’ of these registers that motivate Hatherley in his assessment of the ‘social condenser’ and Narkomfin Communal House in relation to the ‘militant modernism’ of the twentieth century: ‘So what would it mean, then, to look for the future’s remains? To uncover clues about those who wanted, as Walter Benjamin put it, to “live without traces” Can we, should we, try and excavate utopia?’ (Hatherley, 2008: 3) Hatherley’s meditations ‘offer spectral blueprints for such a future’ that the ruins of a ‘dormant Socialist Modernism’ provides. (Hatherley 2008: 126)

As the palimpsest described by Boric refers apotropaically to the benevolence of those earlier forms, repeated formally in reference to the outline of the protective mountain apperceiveable only as floor plan at the time of reconstruction, so too does the Narkomfin repeat the Iroquois long house and the social promise that it indexes of social and sexual egalitarianism through Lewis Henry Morgan’s own visualist representational transductions of orthogonal forms. These take on a further ‘aestheticized’ function as visualist ‘formal’ elements appropriated then and now by the avant garde, that allow the forms to be disentangled and transduced within a ‘translatory motion’ (Caldenby 2014). This ‘motion’ moves them from the complex social and compromised political conditions following their genesis (producing a certain empirical and historical dissimilitude that is necessary for its productive action as Taussig notes). It then circulates freely, more easily translatable in this formal visualist ‘aesthetic’ fashion that comes to us throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first and enables the benevolent social promise of its forms, as figures such as Hatherley have argued for now and before. How this social promise is to continue to work – in exactly which material register and textures that enable the constitution of social action – is emergent and developing. This is demonstrated in some of the examples shown here, whose engagement produces consciousness and collectivities, and affective forms of knowledge and action – which because of their ‘failures’ – and necessary reiterations ensure, apotropaically, their benevolent social promise that is entailed therein.

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