

Francis Summers

A is for front line

I was asked to write a text about this work we are here to witness, a parallel narrative for the physical work when it was first shown in London, a commentary for a potential publication, a text that did not appear then but ends up before me now. This is a text propelled into being by work made by Ian Dawson and Louisa Minkin within and initially shown within a housing estate block that was earmarked for renewal, regeneration, renovation, renaissance, improvement, creative destruction.

You find the word you find most appropriate for this process.

Ruth Glass found a word for this process that many now use: the word *gentrification* arriving in her 1964 book about a changing London, the term referring to what she called the invasion of one class by another: what might be described as the movement of the middle classes into working class residential areas as a low intensity war.

With David Harvey we might call it the submission of space to a neoliberal logic, understanding that this takes place historically with the increasing shift within city governance from a 'managerial' tendency to 'entrepreneurial' branding. The rise of the global city with their competing art mega-plexes is a way from the burgeoning counter-cultural milieu of the 1960s where the term *gentrification* first emerges.

A hardening of the promises of authentic living into high sheen gloss and the deathly knell of the effervescent pop up shop.

Certainly the form we know as gentrification today emerges from the 1960s onwards as the economy shifts from industrial to service forms, where the social factory extends into all forms of life, where value is extracted from all things, including shifting fluctuations of housing stock linked to social and cultural capital: prices linked to frontier developments,

zeitgeist uplifts and hipster invasions. Cities lose their industrial production zones but zones of housing and development become a core source for the production of value today.

Home and economy are linked, indelibly.

A truism that we live with now is that economics (the inheritor of *oikos* and *oikonomia* the 'management of the household') and politics (the progeny of the *polis* - the city and public affairs) have an unclear relationship. According to Giorgio Agamben we should approach civil war as not merely between two opposing factions within a state, it is rather a fundamental tension between the household and the state, between *oikos* and *polis*; between the inside [constituted by the familial bond] and the outside [the demands of the city], a split between the private and the public. Civil war as the name for the "threshold through which the unpolitical is politicised and the political is 'economised'"... the moment "when the *polis* appears in the reassuring figure of *oikos*" is a shift of civil war into "the paradigm of every conflict."

When thinking of how to start, as I was searching for a set of words, I found myself trying to name something appropriate to the occasion. I came upon something like a primer,

I wanted to start from the beginning, from an alphabetical point of origin.

A simple task.

An ABC.

A is for front line.

These words came to me as I walked thinking about the primacy of struggle, that we start from struggle. Here I continue some rehearsals:

The social is ontologically riven: there is no complete unity, but rather a division in common.

These divisions might be experienced concretely: the wall that divides one plot from another, one people from another, us and them; made spatially distinct.

A frenzy of wall building is coming to define our time.

Wendy Brown has written convincingly on this topic, on the anxious phantasms of national sovereignty attempting to buttress themselves against the deterritorialising flows of global capital.

As 2017 unfolds we have yet to see how Trump's walls and Brexit's retrenchments will fare.

Antagonism reframed as negotiation.

Racism rendered alongside the dire inoculations of patriotism.

Division encountered as a dialectic of exteriority and familiarity; an interplay of belongings and affiliations, filial relations and dispossessions.

Making deals with various devils.

Athena Athanasiou finds dispossession in the birth of the subject by the Other [language, symbolic order, inherent relationality] and in the concrete actions wrought by one group upon another. This notion encompasses the logic of psychic foreclosure of alienation in language, the extraordinarily ambiguous passionate attachments we have to those who have power over us as well as the concrete expropriations between individuals and groups.

In this post-structural logic Being is itself found within the logic of dispossession, casting a shadowy threat within the material and social field. It is through others that we become ourselves, but equally this dependence is the source of exploitation and valorization.

With being as dispossession we also find the social processes of the parcelling out of vulnerability; the assignation of conditions of disposability. [link to Aylesbury]

It is here that (to use the words of Judith Butler) "our interdependency establishes our vulnerability to social forms of deprivation."

I would would like to begin by togetherness, but instead I start from an inter-relationality where having and not having is key.

Dispossession understood as such is akin to alienation, but it is not something that can be solved through the class based appropriation of the means of production. Property, whilst being the bulwark for liberal modern subjectivity, does not solve the tangles of subjectivisation.

To begin with the front-lines of urban insurrection, of the movement against dispossession, I find the barricade exists as a symbol and material practice. The barricade has a history, one described by Eric Hazan as an insurrectionary tool that utilises the very character and make up of lived urban space against those whose rule is contested. It arrives in various forms during revolts against Henry III up to the Paris Commune, appearing in the wars of religion and the search for an alternative society. The barricade is the manifestation of conflict within a street that is worked in and lived in, and a street for which the inhabitants are ready to die.

A home as a livable space, defended. Barricaded against opposing social forces.

The barricade is that which restricts the free movement of the oppressive forces; Swiss guards stuck at every turn, unable to progress; immobilised and attacked by words, bottles, stones, gunfire until forced to retreat. The king forced to flee the city in ignominious conditions. This much happened in 1588.

It is no surprise that Versailles as the seat of divine royal power was precisely built outside of Paris to avoid the bad memory of such an event, with a five year old Louis XIV witnessing the popular barricades of 1648 that overturned royal decree.

It is no surprise that the history of Parisian urban renovation is a history of removing the conditions of possibility for the barricade, the construction of the thoroughfare that foregrounds movement on a vaster scale.

Or, to recognise upgrading for what it is: urban warfare, named, the Hausmann effect, the removal of the 'scandalous alleys' for the 'lavish self-glorification by the bourgeoisie.'

[Engels]

A is for the logic of police and soap.

Of cleansing pathology.

Order and cleanliness.

If the function of the barricade is to withhold movement as the frontline of urban struggle over the right to homes and the right of access to the city, the other metaphor of continual movement arrives. Neil Smith describes this as a constantly moving frontier of disinvestment and reinvestment. Not so much a boundary demarcation, this frontier is instead constantly in motion, across space but also generating narratives and demarcations of space: a movement of naming and assigning. A moving line between the worthy and the worthless, a movement driven by various forces. Smith, citing Frederik Jackson Turner, notes that the frontier has the character of the "outer edge of the wave," a shifting border-line between so-called savagery and civilisation, a movement that demonstrates an urge to make 'livable space' from 'wilderness'.

Such a frontier serves as the mythic urge for the colonisation of space, particularly within the Western conscious, where the West, in its movements beyond itself meets not real people but merely 'the rest' – those people who are soon to colonised, who will have disposability assigned to them.

For Smith the return to the city that occurs in the periods since the 1960s is a revanchist 'revenge' of capital on the people, the rhetorics of 'livability' is a pointed reminder of the terms used throughout the battle over Tompkin Square in New York in the 1980s, a conflict laced with descriptions of the city centre as 'wasteland' populated by disease, disorder and the pathology of crime, a wild west where those who 'braved' living in such space were described by real estate agents as *urban scouts*. This is echoed in the current war over the Aylesbury estate, where a council tsar of regeneration points to the estate as affected by a 'pathological' relation to benefits, and where the Daily Mail describe the site as 'hell's waiting room'.

To paraphrase the Invisible Committee, when you here someone say 'we are building a civilised space' you know you are witnessing urban pacification.

So...

What's art got to do with it?

Or.

Art and gentrification have a concrete relation.

It has been long understood that artists and their choice of living space – often those that have the cheapest price for the largest size, irrespective of 'neighbourhood' character have been the vanguard of gentrification, a crucial part of the process of transforming New York's Lower east Side, Brooklyn or the UK's Old Street from 'wasteland' to 'civilisation'. Loft living and the creative class are often the sign of a changing neighbourhood.

Rhetorics around the 'creative class' in our contemporary world designate the subsuming of counter-cultural tendencies into the entrepreneurial spirit of renewed urban character.

The word 'art-washing' is a recent coinage, freshly minted.

The process is well described by Rosalynd Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan's *The Fine Art of Gentrification*, published in 1984, describing the processes taking part in New York's Lower east Side and the responsibility the artist, gallerists, buyers and real estate speculators must take in this.

The process of Artangel and its failed project by Mike Nelson in the Aylesbury estate is well documented in Christopher Jones' 'Pyramid Dead – The Artangel of History', written in 1984.

Sharon Zukin's book *Loft Living* gives a good account of the close relation between housing artists, art production and the housing market. Martha Rosler more recently gives a lucid account and re-reading of the entrepreneurial claims for the creative class 'benefit to the city and its inhabitability.

Here we see see art intertwined with the frontier, with the management of capital known as oikos.

– art becoming life as (sometimes non-intentional) real estate speculation

– art as the production of value: becoming social capital within a narrative of 'bettering', renewal, renaissance.

Transformation is a good cover word for the cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment, for the displacement that is involved with any reterritorialisation.

Art is no barricade here.

Art and its ability to represent social processes becomes an interesting conundrum: in one sense art can make pictures not homes. In another sense the social processes that frame art concretely affect homes, neighbourhoods and city brands.

The process of art, according to Agamben's commentary in *The Melancholy Angel*, was once the work of transmission – the continuation of tradition. With the modern era, with the splenetic morbid detachment of Baudelaire born in part from the context of the bloody dismantling of the barricades of 1848, art takes up the labour of interruption and assumes alienation. Such an interruptive process finds the past – separated from its transmission into the present – but only in negation, in relation to an interest in the new that can only be 'known by the untruths of the past'. The past as ruin becomes redeemed but only in the dead space of the museum.

Agamben's description of the promise and task of art go thus:

"By transforming the principle of man's delay before truth into a poetic process and renouncing the guarantees of truth for love of transmissibility, art succeeds once again in transforming man's inability to exit his historical status, perennially suspended in the inter-world between old and new, past and future, into the very space in which he can take the original measure of his dwelling in the present and recover each time the meaning of his action"

I take this to mean the trouble of living, of making a livable space for living between the ruins of the past and the ruination of progress. Art's angel – which Agamben evokes from Durer's famous engraving – is lodged in an atemporal non-time, staring at scattered tools that have become inoperative, de-utilitarianised. Art as the inoperative, as the putting down of work tools. I wonder aloud about the de-linking of art from production in order to make a livable time, yet the distinction between art and production of value is ever decreasing as seen in the social processes described.

Agamben's concluding words to his essay demonstrate an interesting paradox for our time:

"According to the principle by which it is only in the burning house that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible for the first time, art, at the furthest point of its destiny, makes visible its original project."

I find myself asking:

Is art the process of burning houses or transforming homes?

[certainly in this space we see work that look precisely at that process]

Is art's relation to the home most fundamentally as oikos, linked to the management or governance that economy demands, a demand that renders us perpetually homeless.

How can we address the historical processes that we witness without turning them into gnomonic objects forever separated from us?

*Problems of addressing 'real life' events without them becoming ossified commodities within the museum.

[How can such processes be documented or described? Or contested? Or rendered ambivalent? Or rendered visible, even?]

How might art encompass or render inoperative such social relations?

This is a question worth asking.

Or, is art the imperative to make dwelling in the present possible?

How can we picture a home in these terms?

To avoid answering such questions I'll end where I began.

[but art is frame!?!]

A is for front line.

A is for an apartheid of the imagination

A is for violence

A is for agony, agonism

antagonism

agency

autonomy

anomie and anaesthesia

B is for

bittering

battering

battle

basting

bastard

C is for concatenation, constituent, components, construction

class

culture

comedy

Class War, Colonisation of everyday life, or Capitalism as Crisis.

Consumption or the Common.

Commodities and Counselling.

A is for art, or art into life, not art for the few but art for the many, practised by the many.

A is for art=life.

Our front-lines of art affecting life.

Perhaps understood as lifestyle choices.

No beginnings. No points of origin.

Just modulations.

Life that is styled.

emptying out the people

A is for affiliations

with the fiction of people

with upgrading

with service industry production

the mining of the social

A is for Abstraction, concretely felt

A is for

absorption &

appropriation (read, dispossession)

A is for alternative facts

mythic language of the waiting rooms of living hell

Folkloric horror, tenement fiction.

Narrative models

Postmodernism, I am told, begins with the end of meta-narratives

conjoined to the destruction of social housing

A bitter irony for critical theories of difference

As the common hearth is further dismantled, as boundaries re-assigned

To regenerate

To cut a ditch in the sky

An augur in the templum

An inauguration of tears

As above so below:

filling up, filling in

giving up, giving in

given out

tendered

Pyramids and blue haze;

Raptures of the present.

Bettered? Bittered? Battered. Rollicking, roiling, flavoured. Indelible taints.

Currying favours.

Couriers of bad faith.

Mining cultural capital carries flavours.

To regenerate.

To reduplicate

Socially assigned disposability.

Assigned non-viability

Consigned to invisibility.

Dumps.

Dumps.

Dumps.

Wallowed pathology of the social as daemonic excuse for capital acquisition.

Fairy logic of assigned governance.

Fathers save us.

Filial betrayal

Kinship and fam.

Family and famine. Famished.

Yet

Untouched, untouchable

Liquid mobile capital brand management

Capitals as entrepreneurial brand without social reproduction considerations

Pure abstraction

A riot of possibility

Whose right to the city?

Upgrading as continual soft conflict

From austerity to perverted promises of communal luxury

How might our bonds be figured?

Bondage and the pathology of the flow.

Free flow.

Toilet mentality.

A politics of profits through care.

Disinvestment. Reinvestment.

Cycles.

Frontiered. Leveraged.

The End.