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'Telling decoratively': Ben Nicholson's *white reliefs* and debates around abstraction and modernism in the home in the late 1920s and 30s.

Andrew Stephenson

'Decoration is the spectre that haunts modernist painting', or so at least Clement Greenberg proposed in 1958.¹ And throughout Western European and North American modernism, 'decoration' and the 'decorative' have been employed as terms of disapproval and disapprobation branding as inferior work that apparently compromised its artistic credentials and aesthetic integrity for ornamental effects.² Equally, the fashionable and fashion-consciousness were also castigated as frivolous and fickle traits compromising artistic standards and all too readily embracing commercialism. In the process of distancing the 'decorative', the 'fashionable' and the 'commercial' from 'authentic' modernism, formalist discourse has employed what Peter Wollen has called a 'cascade of antinomies' to shore up the category distinctions between 'Modernism' proper and its tarnished 'other'. These divides worked between and across revealing oppositions that included 'functional/decorative, useful/wasteful, natural/artificial'³ and, at moments of crisis, the language of sexual difference was strategically deployed to reinforce the correctness of such distinctions.

Nowhere was the anxiety about the contamination of 'masculine' modernism by its feminine 'other' more pronounced than in the evaluation of abstraction in Britain in the late 1920s and 1930s, exemplified by the critical reception of Ben Nicholson's *reliefs* (such as *White Relief* (1935, plate 1) which were subsequently seen by many modernist writers as representing the pinnacle of English reductive modernism.^{FN} Two primary concerns were, first, that abstract art, as mediated through articles in the popular press by non-specialist critics and as circulated in

fashion and life-style journalism, was primarily identified as 'decorative' in its appeal. This claim was often strongly refuted by art specialists, art critics and museum curators who were themselves ardent supporters of Nicholson's work. Second, there was a belief amongst popular journalists that Nicholson's abstract work was self-consciously aimed at the contemporary furnishings market and knowingly exploited its compatibility with then fashionable all-white interior furnishing ensembles. As a quote from the *New English Weekly* in April 1936 underscores, for younger audiences abstract art was increasingly viewed as more appropriate to the modern home than conventional subject-paintings since 'abstractions can be used (and for this purpose, they are more 'useful' than pictures of Psyche, cows, apples, the Virgin Mary, gypsies, Venice, sunshine or moonshine) as 'decorations' for rooms furnished in the Twentieth-century style'. 4

This perceived alignment of Nicholson's abstract work was highly problematic since the polarities (and the gender distinctions they marked off) were themselves fluid and tentative. Moreover, their re-structuring was responsive to (and reflective of) the vulnerability of men's (and women's) professional and economic status from 1929-36. In May 1930, as the *Architectural Review* recorded, the distinctions between fine art, architecture and design practices seemed clearly established in gendered terms since 'Most architects [and by implication, artists] don't really want to do decoration which is the feminine side of a masculine job'.⁵ However, during and after the Slump from c.1929-33, economic uncertainty and job insecurity revised these boundaries resulting in an unstable reproduction of earlier gender identities and a redrawing of previous aesthetic hierarchies.⁶ By the time of the 'Modern Pictures for the Modern Home: An Exhibition of Abstract Art in Contemporary Settings' in April 1936, organised by S. John Woods and Duncan Miller at Duncan Miller's London

showroom, which included Nicholson's two examples of Nicholson's carved reliefs, this populist conviction that abstract was decorative was explicitly confronted in the catalogue introduction where it stated that 'abstract artists do not paint so that your rooms may look nice. This point needs stressing since abstract painting and sculpture are often solely regarded as decoration which they emphatically are not'. FN

It is my argument that Nicholson clearly knew the risk that misrepresenting his intentions in this way posed to his works' claimed artistic and aesthetic integrity. In this article, I will examine the terms of Nicholson's engagement with the 'decorative' and with domesticity and analyse the difficulties such populist claims posed for his works' critical evaluation in the light of the artist's changing personal situation and shifting historical factors. Two examples are instructive. At the Lefevre Gallery in July 1928 and again in the Seven and Five Society exhibition in March 1929, both Winifred Nicholson and her husband Ben showed together.⁷ In the Lefevre show, both artists' works were exhibited alongside ceramics by William Staite Murray highlighting and reinforcing the affinity between contemporary painting and pottery. Winifred Nicholson's brightly coloured wild flower compositions such as *Red Geraniums* were set against his still lifes of earthenware jugs, mugs and plates (such as *Still life with knife and lemon* (May 1927)). In the second exhibition, both displayed Cornish seascapes and beach scenes such as her *Pilchard Nets, the Island* (c. 1928, plate 2) and his *Porthmeor Beach No. 2* (1928, plate 3). Critics got the message partly right commenting upon the works self-conscious 'distortion' and 'primitivist' style, but they inflected this differently. For example, in a review in *Artwork* (Autumn 1928) Winifred's works were praised for 'charming everyone; clean and bright in colour, airy and spontaneous in feeling... [Her] flower-pieces and landscapes are most attractive decorations'. By contrast, Ben's works were less favourably received by

this critic: his 'still lives seem merely ridiculous' and his 'landscapes have a sort of nursery charm'.^{FN} However, it was the apparently fleeting interpretation of the subject using visual codings that suggested a self-consciously constructed, cosmopolitan 'naivety' with its indebtedness to Bloomsbury aestheticism and to an 'anglicised' version of French cubism that registered as especially suspect and ambiguous. P.G. Konody reviewing the Cornish landscapes in the *Observer* addressed this issue and declared:

Mr and Mrs Nicholson...ostensibly set out to paint some specific bit of coast like Porthmeor Beach, but reduce all objects to mere symbols, and from the point of view of representation, take such liberties with their theme that these distorted symbols merely make up a kind of decorative rebus.⁸

What the critics of both shows had missed was that that Winifred's and Ben's paintings alongside Staite Murray's pottery demonstrated a compatibility of approach and shared a simplicity of technique and truth to materials ethic that was much admired by many contemporary British artists, writers and collectors in the mid-late 1920s. H.S. Ede writing in *Artwork* earlier in Winter 1926 had applauded these artistic and aesthetic overlaps stressing that 'All three artists...form a most interesting trinity, their work is curiously synthetic...'^{FN} Furthermore, all three were participants in the Seven and Five Society whose membership eagerly embraced this allegiance of contemporary painting, sculpture and pottery as well as promoting the possibilities such aesthetic ideals presented for an integrated union of modern arts and crafts pottery.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the resonance of a simple, rural idyll and 'back to nature' cult held very different significations for Winifred's work (and its perceived artistic identity) than it did for Ben's. Whilst hers referred back to a 'simplicity' and

'honesty' of conception epitomised by her flower paintings and still lives incorporating simple domestic objects, which in Bloomsbury terms was encircled by notions of the 'decorative' and 'domestic' simplicity as positive virtues (and appropriate to its modern 'feminised' English vernacular crafts ideals), his works registered to certain critics as less convincing transcriptions of such an aesthetic: as 'flat patterns made out of the interpretation of jugs or dishes, or landscapes reminiscent of embroidered samplers'.⁹ The works references to a kind of low key rusticity and understated English rural 'bohemianism', which going back to Augustus John and his gypsy days had been glossed with a virile male mystique, had evidently not been forceful enough.¹⁰

Nicholson in a later letter to Mary Chamot tried to sort out this 'confusion' and to retrieve the situation. He wrote that: 'It is misleading to bracket our names [together] because the work we were doing at that time was extraordinarily different - the difference between very bright coloured flower paintings (external, feminine) and very sober brown and grey still life (masculine)'.¹¹ In other words, Nicholson's 'masculine modernism' (as he characterised it to Chamot) had collapsed in the critics' eyes into an engulfing 'feminine' and 'decorative rebus'.

A second case study is equally revealing. In autumn 1933, similar tensions reappeared when Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth shared a joint exhibition.¹² She showed her carvings including *Figure (Mother and child)* (1933, plate 4) and he displayed his latest collages. Reminiscent of Picasso's and Braque's pre-war cubist collages, *Collage with Spanish postcard* (1933) and *Composition Bugatti 5 litres* (1933, plate 5) made explicit reference to contemporary car racing, to gambling and to Mediterranean café culture. Informed critics were probably aware that Hepworth and

Nicholson were romantically attached and had already exhibited together many times (notably at an earlier joint-show in December 1932).¹³ In April 1933, both artists had been invited by Jean Héliion to join the *Abstraction-Création* group in Paris and both would show work in its showcase Paris exhibition in December 1933.

During 1933, Nicholson had been hailed in the British press as 'now our foremost abstract painter'; a claim that he actively promoted by exhibiting regularly throughout the year. In addition, both Hepworth and Nicholson had diversified into interior decoration producing rug and linocut textile designs in which cubist fragmentation and geometric motifs were integrated within a decorative pattern. And a selection of these works were on display within the Lefevre Gallery leading the more popular daily newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror* to classify it as another example of 'the current outbreak of exhibitions of modern furniture and fabrics' in London.¹⁴

Critics quite naturally compared the two artists' work employing Hepworth's work as the yardstick for evaluating Nicholson's. Her art was praised for its 'inward looking' and 'interior' qualities suggesting a confident 'natural femininity'. Hepworth's carvings were applauded as 'enchanting', 'quiet ornaments' and 'always feminine' that 'out distanced the paintings (even though numerically they are outnumbered)'.¹⁵ By contrast, Nicholson's work was criticised for being too conspicuously indebted to Braque and Picasso, and for plagiarising French cubism to the point that it appeared that Nicholson was 'masquerading as a wild cubist' again.¹⁶ 'Nicholson gives us no new vision and no new experience' rounded the *Sunday Referee*.¹⁷ The *Weekend Review* contrasted the 'overstated modernity' of Nicholson's paintings with the 'naturalness' of Hepworth's carvings and concluded in her favour that:

The essential difference seems to me that Mr. Nicholson forces his self-conscious vision upon us, while Miss Hepworth quietly reveals inevitable processes. His forms are arbitrary. He is most of the time a designer working with an eye for effect. Miss Hepworth is also a designer, but her designs spring from the breath of life and she leaves the effect to take care of itself.

There is something a little unstable about his art, whereas Miss Hepworth's is essentially stable.¹⁸

It was perhaps this anxiety that *The Times* critic had tried to put his finger on when he wrote that Nicholson has 'the gift of turning the most rigid abstractions into mild, but often attractive ornaments' in which 'austerity is changed to neatness' and 'coldly Cubist' languages' become 'decorative works of art'.¹⁹ '[It is] a problem that Mr. Nicholson will ultimately have to face. For it is obvious that he cannot go on indefinitely repeating pastiches on Picasso and even on himself' berated one critic.²⁰

One reason for this interpretation was the shifting attitude of English critics to French cubism who saw it as an *avant-garde* rhetoric transformed into a commercialised and popularised style.²¹ This response was, at least in part, a result of a whole range of cubist motifs and languages achieving widespread commercial success within contemporary product design and luxury goods markets in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Following this trend in their 1929 study of *The New Interior Decoration*, Dorothy Todd and Raymond Mortimer noted with some degree of irony that cubism had been tamed by the marketplace. 'Painting like Picasso's [they claimed] made a renaissance of interior decoration possible' [and] 'Marie Laurencin and Braque have insinuated themselves into public favour... You cannot go into a milliners or even a hosier's today without seeing cubist design...and you are exhorted

to buy meat extracts and laxatives in a language derived from Picasso'.²² It was in part this changed attitude that still haunted the critical evaluation of Nicholson's work.

The period from 1933 through to February 1935 was a watershed in Nicholson's development marking out a period of rapid experimentation in the light of his extensive exposure to and knowledge of contemporary European abstraction.²³ Furthermore, this re-assessment coincided with the impact of the Depression in Britain from c. 1929-34/35 when modern art had become more explicitly subject to wider economic and political factors.²⁴ The *reliefs* made from late 1933 and displayed at the *Unit One* exhibition at the Mayor Gallery in April 1934, and the *white reliefs* shown at the Alex Reid & Lefevre Gallery, London in September 1935 show Nicholson questioning a whole set of technical and conceptual procedures through which many English artists had tried to revitalise English still life and landscape genres.²⁵ The *First completed relief* finished in Paris in December 1933 (plate 6) revealingly retained the earlier 'sombre brown, 'masculine' colouring (as he put it to Chamot). It also carefully demonstrated hand-drawn geometry, hand-carved marks on the picture surface and the backboard, pronounced brush marks and uneven colour variation. In their apparently unskilled and 'primitivist' way, such features (as Winifred Nicholson and Hepworth knew) upheld a broadly 'truth to materials' aesthetic; one which had been highly praised by formalist art critics as retaining the residues of an earlier Arts and Crafts ideology and one which was positively valued within Bloomsbury circles.²⁶

The *white reliefs* completed from February 1934 systematically reduced, though did not abandon completely, the vestiges of such personalised indexing. The forms were gouged out by hand and then attached to a backboard before being covered with white oil paint (sometimes commercially produced Ripolin) over a grey

under paint (as in *White Relief*). This overlay without a layer of gesso reduced the overt signs of brush marks. In addition, the interface between artwork and frame was carefully modulated through the use of a grey line between the two planes to unite the grey under-painting with the grey frame and to suggest a structural unity between artwork, frame and environment. The geometric shapes were further regularised using a ruler, a right angle and compass and these were enclosed within neatly contained, box-frames. Finally, the use of impersonal, functional titles coldly suggested a puritanical revisionism at work. Through their alignment of cubism with an elegant functionalism, the *white reliefs* made a claim for a convergence of abstraction with modern materials. And so successfully did they merge the cubist 'surface' with the support that the cubist armature appeared part of the very material infrastructure of the artwork. Enacted in the pursuit of what Nicholson termed 'logic, construction and directness'²⁷ (and signalling the symbolic erasure of the 'feminine' and the 'decorative'), these procedures disqualified his earlier technical practices to such an extent that one critic even called the *white reliefs* 'de-pictures' to point up their destructive 'negativity'.²⁸

Nevertheless, in the complex and shifting overlaps of gender, sexuality and modernism, this resistance to any easy assimilation as 'decorative' required some anticipation of the kind of uses they might be put to and what spaces they were intended for (or imagined to be made for). Moreover, they anticipated (as Nicholson's idealistic convictions reinforce) a future synthesis of the 'fine' and the 'decorative arts' in which the divisions between 'modernism', architecture, design and 'decoration' were rendered obsolete.²⁹ By February 1934, Nicholson appears to have been fully aware that although his *white reliefs* were conceived within the studio as part of a 'utopian' project, once in the public realm they were available to be used in a compromised way

as a decorative addition to the modern home. In August 1934, Nicholson said as much in a letter to the architect Wells Coates. Making a reference to Coates's single person, 'minimum flat'³⁰, then exhibited in model form for the Isokon Lawn Road flats, Hampstead at the Dorland Hall exhibition of British Industrial Art, Nicholson wrote, presumably with the *white reliefs* in mind: 'I have some new work and very much want to try it out in a severe rectangular white room - some time, some day, say at the Dorland Hall?'³¹ Nicholson's request to Coates acknowledged the difficulties that the contemporary re-alignment of abstraction with the utilitarian and the functional posed, and it recognised that the *white reliefs* were compatible with contemporary taste in interior furnishings. Nevertheless, as *Punch's* cartoon (2 August 1933, plate 7) amusingly pointed out, if the inclusion of the solitary Isokon dining table risked compromising the severe minimalist aesthetic of Coates's flat, what restrictions did such conditions place upon the modern artwork?

By the end of 1933, the British economy was showing signs of improvement as the rising income of younger, middle class professionals was starting to affect a post-Slump boom in the housing industry and in the associated interior design and furnishings markets.³² As Coates's solo flat recognised, it was necessary to respond imaginatively to these changing conditions of modern private and personal life. Within this new constituency of fashion conscious, single householders (especially single women) cubist vocabulary had become popularised in large circulation fashion, design and 'ideal home' magazines and was synonymous with 'International Modern' style. Writing in the *Studio*, Douglas Goldring noted the emergence of this 'vast army of middle class flat dwellers who formerly only aspired towards reproductions [but who are now] beginning to purchase originals'.³³ For this audience, as the *Truth* art

critic stressed, 'Essentially the modern picture is a form of architectural decoration and...it is generally most successful when it accepts that condition.³⁴

As the call for work compatible with what *Vogue* termed 'clean shaven interiors' increased,³⁵ demand outstripped supply. And the larger scale furnishing outlets of the High Street and department stores responded quickly selling tubular metal tables and chairs, plainly coloured furniture and rugs with geometrical patterns to complete the rigorously 'minimalist' aesthetic. At the time of Nicholson's solo exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery in September-October 1935, his *white reliefs* appeared to complement the contemporary taste for all white, spartan décor. Philip Hendy's review 'Art - the White period' in the *London Mercury* (November 1935) noted:

Eighteen months ago the manager of the furnishing department in London's most expensive store was bewailing the difficulty of obtaining white pictures. If only painters would study the needs of the market and abstain from using so much colour! So hygienic has become the taste of our more fashionable decorators that only white pictures can be included in their schemes.³⁶

And what was especially incriminating was the *white reliefs* similarity to contemporary bathroom décor in their severe form and hygienic, all-white design. Hugh Gordon Porteus writing in the *New English Weekly* forewarned his readers that Nicholson's work was not to be taken 'at face value' as 'simply a lavatory art form, a clean, antiseptic bathroom art which extract from their function the splashboard and the lavatory basin...'³⁷

Such a defence suggests that altered frameworks for understanding modern design aesthetics and abstraction were already in place and would, as Hendy was aware, colour evaluations of the *white reliefs*. Paradoxically, it was precisely at this

historical moment that this functional design aesthetic was extensively assimilated within mainstream British culture and characterised as broadly 'German' in origin. Widely identified with the accommodation by younger British architects and designers (like Coates) of Bauhaus ideas (exemplified by Walter Gropius, Berthold Lubetkin and Marcel Breuer) and with the increasing 'Anglicisation' of German and Soviet design theory, it was disseminated through advertising, photo-journalism and film.³⁸ Moreover, keen interest was encouraged by the arrival in Britain of key émigrés from Nazi Germany from 1933.³⁹

Nicholson's involvement with the Mayor Gallery reinforced his works' perceived Germanic cultural allegiances⁴⁰ since he had first displayed his *reliefs* in its pioneering exhibition of 'Recent Works by English, French and German Artists' in April 1933. The Mayor Gallery had gained a reputation as an energetic and dynamic gallery showing 'advanced' work by continental artists, especially promoting recent German work.⁴¹ Completely refurbished in 1933 by a leading architect Brian O'Rourke, the Mayor had a startling white and orange-vermilion exterior and a split-level layout with white roughcast walls, hidden lighting and stainless steel tubular furniture. The gallery was, as many commentators praised, 'the last word in modernity' heralding 'the Bauhaus [coming] to Cork Street'.⁴²

Critics saw Nicholson's abstractions and the gallery design as complimentary. *The Time's* reviewer noted that 'the new picture is...greatly helped by the setting'. P.G. Konody in the *Daily Mail* praised 'the very interior on different levels, the rustless steel furniture, hidden lighting and severe simplicity..[for] having the effect of a cubist picture'. Both *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* applauded the Mayor Gallery design for its 'modern taste' with the *Harper's Bazaar* critic going so far as to claim that 'the essential lack of ostentation central to the Mayor Gallery exhibition...makes its effect

a cumulative one..[for] in these circumstances [modern art] becomes intelligible'.⁴³ Such fashionable framings, as Anthony Bertram later identified in *Design for Today* (May 1934) even downplayed Modern Art's commodification since 'the gallery feeling is replaced by a room feeling; the pictures so far as it is possible in a gallery...tell decoratively...They are part of a decorative scheme rather than goods displayed for sale'.⁴⁴ As decorative pieces for the fashionable home, Nicholson's abstract reliefs perfectly complimented the Mayor's ultra-modern décor and styling. 'Do not think of them' urged *Vogue* 'over mantelpieces, but above a chromium radiator...in a delightful modern interior'.⁴⁵

One consequence of this complex reception history was that Nicholson's *white reliefs* were seen as participating in what the *Architectural Review* characterised as 'a Teutonic corrective [in modern design] which was more than ever necessary to offset Latin exuberance [and counter] the English crudely and slavishly imitating French taste'.⁴⁶ It was just such an interpretation of Nicholson's *white reliefs* that led to Kenneth Clark's vituperative attack published in the *Listener* (2 October 1935). Clarke attacked German culture's insidious infiltration of contemporary British art: 'We have paid as usual the price for having conquered Germany materially by being conquered by German culture...The claim that geometric art is historically respectable is a curious part of a programme to disregard the past'.⁴⁷ Herbert Read's response published in the next issue of the *Listener* made explicit the centrality of Nicholson's work to these debates being entitled 'Ben Nicholson and the Future of Painting'.⁴⁸ Paul Nash's subsequent defence entitled 'Nicholson's Carved Reliefs' published in the *Architectural Review* in October 1935 similarly acknowledged that Nicholson's work was the focus of Clark's derision.⁴⁹

Just prior to this, in September 1935, Nicholson held a solo exhibition at the Lefevre Gallery in London. The English popular press denounced the *white reliefs* he displayed not just as 'bad' art, but also for failing to be art at all. The *Star* attacked them as 'full of nothing'. The *Yorkshire Observer* complained that the 'Carved reliefs are Incomprehensible'.⁵⁰ The *Scotsman* condemned their 'dismal self-denial' and concluded that they 'are the nearest thing to empty frames anyone has ever seen...the art of painting bled white'. Yet this reviewer got the message partly right when he stated 'Here painting is gone completely architectural...It might however look in place in a building of the new 'functional' type and actually that is where these reliefs should be shown - [but] certainly not in a gallery'.⁵¹

The *Scotsman's* critic interpreted the *white reliefs's* 'bloodlessness' as a symbol of Nicholson's submission to fashion and to commercial forces. To reinforce his point, he lambasted the sexual credentials of contemporary male artists comparing them with the 'effeminate aesthetes' of the 1880s as an index of English modernism's enervation. He concluded that even the homosexual, fey and 'dandified' circles of the *Yellow Book* group - the likes of Aubrey Beardsley, J.A. Symonds and Oscar Wilde - were more virile and more 'butch' than any contemporary artist: 'They may have been a wan and bloodless band these late Victorian aesthetes, but doubtless, they would have seemed terrible fellows, real 'hearties' besides some of your Paul Nashes, Ben Nicholson and Herbert Reads'.⁵²

As Nicholson may have wryly observed, the critical reception of his work and its inferred sexual impotency demarcated a shifting and anxious nexus of modernism, decoration and 'masculinity'. His art whether understood as the product of a masquerading wild cubist; a fashion-following *ensemblier*; a Bauhaus-inspired designer, or an enervated ascetic abstractionist was continually under the threat of an

effeminising 'decoration' and open to accusations of market orientation. Even at their most uncompromising, Nicholson's *White reliefs* were still haunted by the decorative in spite of his supporters repeated and emphatic insistence that '[Ben Nicholson's] Art is *not* what it may seem to a superficial or second hand observance, merely decorative'.⁵³

This recurring paradox embodied a deep-rooted and persistent modernist paranoia: namely that abstraction would, in spite of all its alignment of cubism with industrial materials; contrary to its severe white purity and avoidance of ornament; and contradicting its self-professed 'utopianism' and its claimed allegiances to a unified design and technology culture, mark out modernism in decline. And that, when relocated in what *Vogue* so revealingly called 'the Englishwoman's castle...the fashionable modern flat feminine',⁵⁴ it would register as enfeebled and 'emasculated', and still continue to 'tell decoratively'.

Endnotes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Tradition, Revival and the Modern in British Art and Design 1910-39' panel at the College Art Association annual conference in New York in February 2003 and I am grateful to Cheryl Buckley and David Peters Corbett for the opportunity to speak. Another version was presented as 'Ben Nicholson and Debates around Abstraction and Modernism in the Home in the late 1920s and 1930s' at the Ben Nicholson conference, the Courtauld Institute of Art, London organised by Lee Beard in May 2007.

1 Clement Greenberg, 'Milton Avery', *Art and Culture*, Boston, Mass., 1961 quoted in Peter Wollen's 'Out of the Past: Fashion/ Orientalism / The Body' first published in *New Formations*, no. 1, Spring 1987 and reprinted in *Raiding the Icebox. Reflections on Twentieth Century Culture*, London: Verso 1993, 1-34. with Greenberg quote, p.13.

2 This understanding of Modernism's 'other' history and the status and erasure of the 'ornamental' is indebted to Wollen, *Raiding the Iceberg*, pp.14-15. For the historical context, see Peter McNeil, 'Designing Women: Gender, sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c. 1890-1940', *Art History*, vol.17. no.2, December 1994, pp.631-657 and the editors' introduction in Bridget Elliott and Janice Helland (eds.), *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880-1935*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, pp.1-14.

3 Wollen, *Raiding the Iceberg*, p.29.

4 Hugh Gordon Porteus, 'Abstract and Concrete', *New English Weekly*, 30 April 1936 contained in the Lefevre Gallery Presscuttings Albums, 1929-36 [12c, TAM 70-129], Tate Gallery Archive, London. Subsequently referenced as LGPA.

5 Editorial: 'Give the Public what it wants', *Architectural Review*, May 1930, p.225.

6 For a fascinating study of the shifts in gendered codings in English literature in the inter-war period, see Alison Light, *Forever England. Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp.3-11. In relation to the impact of these revisions in the 1930s on design and women designers, see Cheryl Buckley, 'The decorated object: gender, modernism and the design of industrial ceramics in Britain in the 1930s' in Bridget Elliott and Janice Helland (eds.), *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880-1935*, 2002, pp.53-69. For a broader study of modernism and design cultures in inter-war Britain, see Buckley's recent *Designing Modern Britain*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007.

7 *Paintings by Ben and Winifred Nicholson and pottery by Staite Murray*, Lefevre Galleries, London, July 1928; *Ninth Exhibition of the Seven and Five Society*, Arthur Tooth and Sons, London, March 1929.

8 P.G. Konody 'The Seven and Five Society', *Observer*, 17 March 1929, p.14.

9 See Bridget Elliott and Jo-Anne Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (im)positionings*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp.162-4 and their discussion about how the domestic as a political arena became identified by Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell as an alternative 'feminine' modernism. For a compelling examination of Bloomsbury aesthetics and politics as demonstrated in and by interior design, see Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms. Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, pp.7-17. For a fascinating discussion of Nicholson's early aesthetic position, see Chris Stephens, 'Ben Nicholson: Modernism, Craft and the English vernacular' in *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past, 1880-1940*, edited by David Peters Corbett, Ysanne Holt and Fiona Russell, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 244-5.

10 For Augustus John and this distinctive troping of the English modernist artist, see Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects. British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp.50-52.

11 This letter is transcribed by Andrew Wilson in his unpublished 'The Seven and Five Society: Modernist Activity in British Art, 1919-37', MPhil. thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1988, p.146, footnote 84.

12 *Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson*, Alex Reid and Lefevre, London, October-November 1933.up.

13 *Carvings by Barbara Hepworth, paintings by Ben Nicholson*, Arthur Tooth and Sons, London, November-December 1932. This show is discussed in greater detail in Penelope Curtis and Alan G. Wilkinson, *Barbara Hepworth. A Retrospective*, Liverpool, Tate Gallery, and Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1994, pp.40-43.

14 Unidentified review in the *Daily Mirror*, 23 October 1933 [LGPA]. Nicholson had also participated in the earlier *Room and Book* exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery in April 1932 which placed applied art alongside contemporary painting and sculpture.

15 Reviews from the *New Statesman and Nation*, 4 November 1933; *The Times*, 8 November 1933; *The Weekend Review*, 4 November 1933 [LGPA].

16 The *Observer*, 29 October 1933. As Jeremy Lewison has established, Nicholson met Braque in Paris in January 1933, and met both Picasso and Braque on his return to Paris in March 1933. He also subsequently visited Picasso's studio at Chateau Boisgeloup, Gisors with Hepworth in the same month (Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, London: Tate Gallery, 1993, pp.39, 241).

17 'Ywain', *The Sunday Referee*, 29 October 1933 [LGPA].

18 *The Weekend Review*, 4 November 1933 [LGPA].

19 *The Times*, 8 November 1933 [LGPA].

20 *The Sunday Referee*, 29 October 1933 [LGPA].

21 For example, *Vogue* by the mid-1920s was claiming that 'Cubism still flourishes, but it has lost its intransigence' and has been successfully 'domesticated' within the home. ('The Work of some Modern Decorative Artists', *Vogue*, late August 1926, p.68).

22 Dorothy Todd and Raymond Mortimer, *The New Interior Design. An Introduction to its principles and an international survey of its methods.*, London, 1929, pp.12-13.

23 Ben Nicholson wrote 'One was wanting to get right back to the beginning and then take one step forward at a time on a firm basis...' quoted in Charles Harrison, 'Abstract Painting in Britain in the early 1930s', *Studio International*, vol. 173, no. 888, April 1967, p.185.

24 See my 'Strategies of Situation': British Modernism and the Slump, c. 1929-34', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1991, pp.30-51 for a fuller account of the impact of wider social and economic forces on the development of British modernism during these years. In Nicholson's case, his financial situation was acute following his increasing estrangement and subsequent separation from Winifred Nicholson upon whose private income he could no longer depend. In 1931, Nicholson earned £90 net from the sale of his work (against an average income of between £700-1000) and his severe financial difficulties continued throughout the early 1930s.

25 See Jeremy Lewison's discussion of Nicholson's modernisation of still life and landscape themes in Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, pp.24-36.

26 These overlaps between early modernism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in England have been extensively discussed by Stella Tillyard in her *The Impact of Modernism. The Visual Arts in Edwardian England*, London: Routledge, 1988, pp.47ff.

27 Letter from Ben Nicholson to Winifred Nicholson dated 30 April 1934 quoted in Lewison, *Ben Nicholson*, p.45.

28 Philip Hendy, 'Art - the White Period', *London Mercury*, vol. 33, no. 193, November 1935, pp.58-59 [LGPC].

29 The idealism of artists such as Nicholson and Hepworth and its links with constructivist art, design and architecture is considered in the cultural context of the later *Circle* publication by Jane Beckett in her 'Circle: the theory and patronage of constructive art in the Thirties' in Jeremy Lewison (ed.), *Circle: constructive art in Britain 1934-40*, Cambridge: Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1982, pp.11-19.

30 This illustration is taken from Frank Pick, 'The Meaning and Purpose of Design', *The Listener*, 28 June 1933, p.1017. Coates's flat was also discussed in 'A Minimum flat', *Design for Today*, July 1933, p.96. The importance of 'minimalism and modernism' in British interior design is discussed in Deborah S. Ryan, *The Ideal Home. The Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition Through the Twentieth century*, London: Hazar, 1997, p.70.

31 Letter from Ben Nicholson to Wells Coates, 2 August 1934 contained in Wells Coates correspondence files, Tate Gallery Archive, London.

32 See A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, reprinted 1966, pp.343-5.

33 Douglas Goldring, 'Artists and Pictures', *Studio*, vol. 107, no. 491, February 1934, p.100.

34 *The Truth*, 26 April 1933 contained in Mayor Gallery Presscuttings Albums, Tate Gallery Archive, London.

35 'Fashion in modern rugs', *Vogue*, 2 April 1930, p.61.

36 Philip Hendy, 'Art - the White Period', the *London Mercury*, vol. 33, no. 193, November 1935, pp.58-9 [LGPA].

37 Hugh Gordon Porteus, 'Art: Mr. Ben Nicholson', *New English Weekly*, vol. 7, no. 21, 3 October 1935, p.414 [LGPA].

38 The foundation in 1933 of the Modern Architecture Research group (MARS) with Coates as chair and the promotion of the 'New Architecture' by leading architectural journals encouraged this trend. One crucial text was Gropius's *The New architecture and the Bauhaus* translated and published by Faber and Faber in 1935. For the growth of this pro-German cultural reorientation, see David Mellor, 'London-Berlin-London: a cultural history. The reception and influence of the New German Photography in Britain 1927-33' in David Mellor (ed.) *Germany. The New Photography 1927-33*, London: Arts Council, 1978, pp.113-130.

39 Amongst others, in the period under examination, Erich Mendelsohn and Eugen Kauffmann came in 1933; Gropius and Erno Goldfinger arrived in London in 1934; Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer in 1935. For a fuller account, see Charlotte Benton, *A Different World. Emigre Architects in Britain 1928-58*, London: RIBA Heinz Gallery, 1995, pp.73-75.

40 Nicholson's work had been shown in Germany at the *Neue Englische Kunst: Ausstellung von Plastik und Malerei* held at the Kunstverein, Hamburg in June-July 1932, and his work was exhibited at the Anglo-German Club, London show of contemporary British art from December 1933-January 1934. Such exposure would have presumably reinforced the assumed pro-German stance of the artist.

41 The *Daily Mail*, 13 April 1933 recognised that in the opening show at the Mayor Gallery 'the Germans will be the great novelty as none of their works have been seen in England before'. Contained in the Mayor Gallery Presscuttings Albums, 1933-35

[TAM 7B 19/113], Tate Gallery Archive, London. Subsequently these will be referenced MGPA.

42 Unidentified review dated April 1933 [MGPA].

43 *The Times*, 22 April 1933; *The Daily Mail*, 20 April 1933; *Vogue*, June 1933; *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1933 [MGPA].

44 Anthony Bertram, *Design for Today*, May 1934, p.164 [MGPA].

45 *Vogue*, 7 March 1934 [MGPA].

46 P. Morton Shand, 'The Myth of French Taste', *Architectural Review*, November 1930, p.225.

47 Kenneth Clark 'The Future of Painting', the *Listener*, vol. 14, no. 351, 2 October 1935, p.544.

48 Herbert Read, 'Ben Nicholson and the Future of Painting', the *Listener*, vol. 14, no. 352, 9 October 1935, pp.604-605 which included an illustration of a white *carved relief* (1935).

49 Paul Nash, 'Nicholson's Carved Reliefs', *Architectural Review*, vol. 78, no. 467, October 1935, pp.142-143.

50 *The Star*, 22 October 1935; *Yorkshire Observer*, 28 September 1935 [LGPA].

51 *The Scotsman*, 30 September 1935 [LGPA].

52 *The Scotsman*, 30 September 1935 [LGPA].

53 Hugh Gordon Porteus review of Ben Nicholson's exhibition at the Alex Reid and Lefevre Gallery in 'Art: Mr. Ben Nicholson', *New English Weekly*, vol.7, no. 21, 3 October 1935, p.414. [LGPA]

54 *Vogue*, early October 1918.

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