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## Histories of the Future: The Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Reconstruction of Modernism in Postwar Britain

There is much misunderstanding of the historical basis of the modern movement which must be dissipated; there is much research to be done in diverse fields such as anthropology, sociology, the economic foundations of art, the scientific analysis of the materials of art. We do not exclude such tasks – indeed they will take on great dimensions as we proceed. But they are only the basis for a programme which projects itself onto the unknown art of the future.<sup>1</sup>

*(The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1947)*

History is our only guide to the future.<sup>2</sup>

*(Peter Reyner Banham, “The History of the Immediate Future”, 1961)*

Both these epigraphs sound a decidedly contemporary note. Shorn of the confidence about projecting the art of the future, the first, from the 1947 founding policy statement of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, could stand as a declaration of intent for the kind of modernist studies that emerged towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Although perhaps the perceived relationship between a modernist past and the present moment that guides such research is more of a motivation than this hasty qualification implies. Tom Gunning’s belief that the “two ends of the Twentieth Century hail each other like long list twins” expresses an attitude surely not limited to him alone among historians of modernism.<sup>3</sup> In this, the contemporary historian of modernism might not be so different from one from the postwar period,

such as Peter Reyner Banham, for whom it was, quite specifically, the history of modernism that was the guide to postwar Britain's immediate future. That this had become the historian's task suggests just how quickly the origins, development and hence contemporary relevance of modernism had become obscured. As early as 1947, it seems, for Herbert Read, Roland Penrose, and those authors of the I.C.A.'s appeal for – what else? – funding for their investigations into the “historical basis of the modern movement.”

But the I.C.A. was not a university department, nor a specialised academic institute, even if it did come to occupy an increasingly important role as a mediator between academia and the art world in London's tangled postwar ecology of cultural institutions. The most important consequences of its reconstruction of modernism in postwar Britain were felt by artists, architects, theorists, and also – though with more of a delay – by writers. If *fin-de-vingtième-siècle* modernist studies largely remained within the chronological terrain set down by earlier critics such as Hugh Kenner, Malcolm Bradbury and James Macfarlane, more recent work has started to take up the task of studying the relationship of modernism to postwar writing. Such work must adopt a double focus in relating the cultural expression of one period to its transformed successor, attend to specificities of reception, as well as distinguish between modernism as an institutionalized archive, as a series of critical and intellectual formations, and as a set of styles and techniques. Thus, questions of periodization and temporality are inescapable in such work, which has developed a diverse range of theoretical formulations in order to address these challenges. For critics such as Urmila Seshagiri, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, and Michael Hart, postcolonial and transnational geographies intersect and transform temporal models of simple continuation and rupture.<sup>4</sup> For Tyrus Miller, Jed Esty, Marina McKay, Jonathan Greenberg and Hannah Sullivan, the concept of late modernism,

drawn from Frederic Jameson, has been one way in which to approach the mid-century literature of Woolf, Waugh, West, Green, Ginsberg and others.<sup>5</sup> Yet ‘lateness’ brings its own problems for postwar writing, as David James writes, “imperfect because it insinuates that they [postwar writers] are sifting through the relics of high modernism and its residual goals.”<sup>6</sup> Lateness in this sense implies that such goals are static, permanently definable, and not perceived to alter due to the historically changing perspectives of later writers.

James’s own proposal of the “modernist futures” of contemporary fiction goes some way to capturing the sense of how an identification with modernism could be a way of moving forward by looking backwards, often through combative, rupturing and dissenting strategies. James detects modernism’s futures in contemporary fiction in style and composition, whereas this article branches outwards to institutions, archives, and other disciplines, and backwards to an earlier period in modernism’s postwar reception. It documents a moment when modernism was constructed as not just the future, but in Banham’s phrase, as the “history of the future.” In doing so, it shows that the historicizing and periodization of modernism that James and Seshagiri have elsewhere traced in contemporary fiction has an earlier genealogy, suggesting it is a defining chronotope of the postwar literary imagination.<sup>7</sup> By introducing the distancing work of historical perspective, a formulation such as the “history of the future” does justice to modernism understood, as by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, as “not simply as a movement belonging to the early decades of the century, but as a tendency that lives a rich and discontinuous life across the period as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> This dialectical relationship between continuity and discontinuity is a movement particularly pertinent to postwar writing in Britain. It is the kind of discontinuity theorised by one of Britain’s most influential re-interpreters of modernist art, one who had his own formative encounter with the I.C.A.: John Berger. Writing on Cubism in the sixties, Berger argued that it was

a moment of “shock” and “incongruity” that existed in “an enclave of time, waiting to be released and to continue a journey that began in 1907.”<sup>9</sup> In his novel *G.* (1972) this becomes the postwar era’s relationship to modernism as a whole, whose true historical meaning can only be understood long after the fact. Like Freud’s temporality of *Nächtraglichkeit*, it is something which cannot be formulated because it occurred “too soon.”<sup>10</sup> And as Derrida has written, Freud’s memories – in the double sense – are always bound up with archives and institutions.<sup>11</sup> As such, they might then be one site for the production of Marcus and Nicholls’ continuous discontinuities of modernism.

This essay argues that the founding of the I.C.A. was an institutionalised expression of a distinctly British understanding of the relationship of modernism across the disciplines to the postwar present: an archive of the history of the future. The I.C.A. is significant because it was, as my epigraph suggests, one of the sites for the reconstruction of modernism as an interdisciplinary phenomenon. This put its collective and far more fragmentary efforts at odds with the influential postwar theorisations developed by Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno, in which the potential of modernism could only be sustained through an isolated investigation of the formal laws of each respective artistic medium.<sup>12</sup> For Jürgen Habermas, the institutional differentiation not just of artistic media, but of “science, morality and art” as “realms of activity in which questions of truth, of justice, and of taste were autonomously elaborated, that is, each under its own specific account of validity”, defines modernity as a whole. Yet for Habermas the time-consciousness of modernity is also that of “the epoch that lives for the future, which opens itself up to the novelty of the future.”<sup>13</sup> The aims of the I.C.A. attempted to diverge from this understanding of modernity as institutional and disciplinary differentiation precisely in order to remain open to the “unknown art of the future.” The I.C.A. is also important for providing a model for the

reconstruction and indeed the production of an interdisciplinary modernism as not just the history of the future, but as an archive of the future. Introducing the discontinuous lacunae and processes of discovery and delay inherent to all archives, I argue that this model was far more characteristic of how modernism was reconstructed in Britain in the fifties, and how it became a model for certain novelists in the early sixties. Indeed, when one considers the fascination with modernist historiographies and styles in the recent fiction of Tom McCarthy, Will Self and Zadie Smith, it seems like modernism's ability to archive the future is still being desired by the contemporary literary imagination.<sup>14</sup>

David Mellor has written that although its contribution to the development of the visual arts in postwar Britain is widely acknowledged, “[a] history of the ICA has yet to be written”, and the accounts that do exist emphasise its role as foil for the rebellion of the breakaway Independent Group.<sup>15</sup> This was a loosely associated but extremely influential group of artists and theorists that formed at the I.C.A. in the early fifties, whose core members were Lawrence Alloway, Toni del Renzio, Richard Hamilton, John McHale, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Alison and Peter Smithson, and whose chief critical cheerleader was Banham.<sup>16</sup> The most detailed study thus far of the foundation of the I.C.A. was written by Anne Massey close to twenty years ago now, and it too largely repeats the narrative of an “elitist” and “European avant-garde” oriented I.C.A., stranded amid the “xenophobic atmosphere of Festival of Britain London”, acting as an oppressive Oedipal father figure for the America-focused Independent Group.<sup>17</sup> While Massey's account is correct in seeing the I.C.A. as pivotal for the formation for the Independent Group, and for being one of the first to identify the I.C.A. as a key site for the shifts in the “changing ideology of modernism Britain”,<sup>18</sup> the thrust of modernist studies since her account has taken as a starting point the undoing of problematic assumptions of the “European” foreignness of modernism in a “xenophobic” Britain,

the “elitism” of the avant-garde versus the populist orientation of cultural studies, and indeed the assumption that there is a singular “ideology of modernism.” On the first point of a binary between “Europe” and “America”, Irénée Scalbert convincingly argues that for the Smithsons and Paolozzi, at the time of the “Parallel of Life and Art” exhibition in 1952, the attraction to ‘American popular culture’ was not its Americanness, but “[its] ‘as found’ quality, its proposition that art could result from an act of choice rather than an act of design.” Further, as Scalbert writes, Peter Smithson claimed to have got this “‘materiality thing’...from Paolozzi, and Paolozzi got it from Jean Dubuffet. Hence they were, he [Smithson] claimed ‘the inheritors of Paris.’”<sup>19</sup> This is an important intervention in the historiography of the Independent Group and of fifties British art more generally, recasting what the attention to popular culture meant in the period. In what follows, I will take up the suggestion from Peter Smithson that there was a strong Surrealist influence on key early Independent Group concerns such as the “as found”, although rather than tracing this, like Scalbert, to post-Second World War French Surrealism, I will instead follow the lines down through British Surrealism, a pathway which the I.C.A. made possible. Inflected by the recovery of the diversity of modernisms as well as the waning of belief in postmodernism as *the* culminating point of postwar culture, Scalbert’s work is representative of the recent surge of critical interest in the Independent Group, whether from theorists of the everyday such as Ben Highmore, or art historians such as Hal Foster.<sup>20</sup> In M. Christine Boyer’s words, the goal of Independent Group members like the Smithsons now seems to have been “to keep the language of modern architecture alive and fresh”, although Sarah Goldhagen sees this as a far more “anxious modernism.”<sup>21</sup> One intent of this essay is to use the I.C.A. to bring this strand of recent research together with the efforts outlined above by literary critics to trace the discontinuous relationship between modernism and postwar British writers such as B. S. Johnson, whose own highly anxious attempts to keep the language of

modernism fresh in fiction were inspired by the Smithsons. Doing so requires an account of the founding of the I.C.A. that, in drawing on recent work, will depart from the account given by Massey and others, as an attention to literature has been absent from her and almost all other accounts. While this will be developed in more detail below, my epigraphic juxtaposition is meant to indicate there is more than superficial resemblance between the I.C.A.'s reconstruction of the history of modern movement for the purposes of projecting the "unknown art of the future", and Banham's later claim that modernist "history is our only guide to the future".

## I. Surrealist Origins

The first discussion of proposals for what was to become the I.C.A. took place in January 1946, when E.L.T. Mesens, Roland Penrose, and Herbert Read organised a meeting "of a few of those interested in the creation of a centre in London from which a Museum of Modern Art could be ultimately planned."<sup>22</sup> At a meeting on 30 January 1946 they were joined by J.B. Brunius, Eric Gregory, G.M. Hoellering, and Peter Watson.<sup>23</sup> This initial list of names shows, as Peter Smithson would later recall, that "the ICA was founded by people whose commitment really was to Surrealism...[it was intended] to be propaganda for that kind of art, and for Picasso."<sup>24</sup> Read, Penrose and Mesens had organized the International Surrealist Exhibition at the Burlington Galleries in 1936, the same year which saw the appearance of Read's edited volume *Surrealism*. In 1938, Mesens, originally from Belgium, had settled in London, took over the management of the London Gallery, and launched the *London Bulletin*, providing a focal point for Surrealist activity in Britain. From this institutional base, as Michel Remy recounts, in 1939 Mesens had proposed his own Museum of Modern Art, in opposition to the plans of Peggy Guggenheim, who had approached Read to be the director of her own planned

Museum.<sup>25</sup> Both plans were abandoned with the outbreak of the war, but this latent conflict between Mesens and Read, and Mesens' own intransigence, would lead to Mesens quickly breaking from the project, in June 1948.<sup>26</sup> The actor and film maker J.B. Brunius was another Surrealist émigré who had settled in Britain during the war to work with Alberto Cavalcanti in the Crown Film Unit. As Nanette Aldred has written, it was first and foremost an understanding of Surrealism “as a theoretical practice” which decisively shaped the founding principles of the I.C.A.<sup>27</sup> Many of the concerns guiding its foundation can be traced in the pre-war and war-time writings of its founders, particularly those of Read, who was to emerge as the I.C.A.'s first President and dominant intellectual influence.

Many of the strands of Read's distinct understanding of modern art were developed in his critical writings during the thirties, and many of these concerns would be taken up at the I.C.A., particularly Read's concern with modern art's relationship to other disciplines of knowledge. Central to his understanding of modernism was his concept of form, which he outlined in *Form in Modern Poetry* (1932) as meaning that the “work of art has its own inherent laws, originating with its very invention and fusing in one vital unity both structure and content.”<sup>28</sup> As Read wrote in *Art Now* (1933), form was always inseparable from content because “form is something *given*, an endowment, and always implies a recipient, a thing formed. But the thing formed – and this is the clue to the whole modern development of art – can be subjective as well as objective – can be the emergent sensibility of the artist himself.”<sup>29</sup> This understanding of cultural forms as something *given*, which shape both the work of art and the sensibility of the subject, shows the influence of Read's readings in the art history of Gottfried Semper, Alois Riegl, and above all Wilhelm Worringer, for whose *Form and Gothic* Read had written an introduction in 1927. In *Form and Gothic*, Worringer had revised Riegl's concept of

*Kunstwollen* away from an idealistic manifestation of the Hegelian *Geist* towards a description of a practice involving the “translation of the objects belonging to the outer world which are to be portrayed in the vocabulary of the contemporary will to form.” The locus of investigation for the art historian is to search among popular forms such as ornament for the complete “grammar” of cultural representations and “[i]t is only after the grammar of artistic speech has thus been established, that man can begin to translate the objects of the outer world into this speech.”<sup>30</sup> This understanding of artistic form as part a wider cultural grammar or structure into which the subject articulates itself, shaping the artist’s sensibility, entailed for Read a critical approach that consciously rejected Eliot’s strictures on impersonality: “criticism must concern itself not only with the finished work of art, but also with the workman, his mental activities and his tools.”<sup>31</sup> In a foreshadowing of the I.C.A.’s postwar policy statement, this also meant that a science of art must admit “evidence from many fields hitherto not associated with the philosophy of beauty – evidence from history and anthropology, from religion and psychology, from morphology and philology – from every science that deals with the spirit of man and the modes of its expression.”<sup>32</sup>

In his 1938 statement on “The Nature of Criticism”, Read sought to break away from the Kantian postulate of the autonomy of art, and wrote that “we must hasten to relate it [criticism] to those systems of knowledge which have to a great extent replaced transcendental philosophy.” To do so, Read drew from Alfred Adler’s theory that “*the attraction of a work of art arises from its synthesis*, and that the analysis of science profanes and destroys this synthesis.”<sup>33</sup>[italics original] Michael Whitworth has written how the theme of “intellectual specialization” appears frequently in Read’s poetry of the twenties and thirties, and argues persuasively that this must be understood as an engagement with the differentiation of spheres of knowledge which in Habermas’ revision of Weber defines

the development of modernity, and about which there was increasingly intellectual anxiety in Britain as a consequence of the First World War.<sup>34</sup> Read's theory of the art work's role in modernity as synthesising knowledge responds to these pressures, and was one which the I.C.A. sought to put into practice. This idea of the art work as a synthesis, and the modernist art work as the most concentrated synthetic art object, thus necessitating a wide ranging and interdisciplinary critical analysis, is a constant throughout Read's criticism in the thirties. In his introduction to *Surrealism* (1936), Read wrote that the synthetic art object was to be approached using the method of Freud's interpretation of dreams, for on the level of signification, "the plastic objects which we find by the aid of our eyes correspond, on another plane of consciousness, to the images found in dreams." This was because the means by which the objects of the material world are "reflected by the human mind, and translated into images," as described by Marx's analysis of the commodity fetish, was "infinitely complicated: a passage through a series of distorting mirrors and underground labyrinths."<sup>35</sup> Read's writings, however, show little sympathy with Marxism as a political program. The destruction of war accentuated his long standing anarchist sympathies. In 1943, he declared

The whole of our capitalist culture is one immense veneer: a surface refinement hiding the cheapness and shoddiness at the heart of things.

To hell with such a culture! To the rubbish heap and furnace with it all! Let us celebrate the democratic revolution with the biggest holocaust in the history of the world. When Hitler has finished bombing our cities, let the demolition squads complete the good work. Then let us go out into the wide open spaces and build anew.<sup>36</sup>

In “The Threshold of a New Age” (1944), Read prophesied that in the post-war “era of reconstruction”, those “individuals in which the spirit of modernism is embodied...will re-emerge eager to rebuild the shattered world.”<sup>37</sup> The foundation of the I.C.A. was one way in which this modernist reconstruction was attempted.

Read’s co-founders also shared his sense of the I.C.A. arising from the epochal destruction of war. In April 1943, J.B. Brunius had written that the experience of war had left soldiers “[r]ent apart by reason and instinct, between the conscious and unconscious” leaving them “[s]hreds of men torn apart by two branches of dialectic.” The experience of war was the truth of the “divergence between material technical progress and the relative moral and philosophic obscurantism of the human race”, and the revelation that “the might he [mankind] draws from nature continued to be applied to the destruction of the species.”<sup>38</sup> This was Brunius’ framing of what Horkheimer and Adorno were contemporaneously describing as the “dialectic of Enlightenment”, the regression during war of instrumental rationality into barbarism.<sup>39</sup> Roland Penrose’s activities during the war, however, indicate the more engaged approach which the I.C.A. was to take towards the question of technology in the postwar era. Penrose worked at the War Office and wrote *The Home Guard Manual of Camouflage* in 1941, for which, as he later recalled, he applied “the principles of cubism to the optical disruption of form obtained by covering a surface with patterns.” His designs for painted boiler suits were helped by photographing his wife, Lee Miller, naked and covered in green paint in a garden in Highgate.<sup>40</sup> There were other, more subtle ways in which Penrose used Surrealist techniques to camouflage the British Home Guard. His advice to imitate animal deceptive behaviour and mimicry recalls his painting *Winged Domino* (1938), a portrait of Valentine Penrose with her eyes shrouded by butterfly wings, hair by birds, as well as Roger Caillois’ theories of insect mimicry.<sup>41</sup> And his advice to populate the countryside

with authentic “human dummies” and ingenious fakes whereby pill boxes would be “painted to look like books stalls” evokes a Home Front landscape populated with Penrose’s own Surrealist objects made from mannequins, such as *The Dew Machine* (1937).<sup>42</sup> Penrose also translated Mesens’ collection of poems written in London during the Blitz, *Third Front & Detached Pieces*, (1944), whose prose-poem entitled “Dream of the 10th of March 1943” offers a darker vision of war technology. The recollection begins with the dreamer walking through “interminable bombed streets, the walls powdered with plaster dust” until he comes to a vast hall full of women working some fifty “fragile metal constructions.” The dreamer starts to play a rhythm on a table, until Einstein appears to congratulate him on inventing his instrument, to which the dreamer replies: “No, the instrument was in existence, I merely discovered the way to use it.”<sup>43</sup> It is difficult not to see this as an allegory of the war-time quest for the nuclear bomb, in which Einstein’s theory of general relativity was employed to discover how to use something that was already there, like the latent content of the dream. The I.C.A.’s concern with synthesising art with science, technology and other disciplines of knowledge was born out of an attempt to utilise Surrealism as a theory and practice to come terms with the experience of shocks and traumas of war-time Britain, but without regressing to the more aporetic conclusions that man was inevitably, in Brunius’ words, “torn asunder.”

## 2. “What is ‘normal’...is change”: an Institute of exhibitions

The shadow of war time destruction out of which the I.C.A.’s organising committee members emerged offers one explanation why, in their initial meetings, that objections were quickly raised about the very concept of a “museum” for modern art. Mesens stressed it should be concerned not with the achievements of art, but with the

stimulation of production. It should bring together “all types of artists – poets, painters, film producers – to stimulate each other.” Brunius underlined this point, stating “it will not only be international, but inter-arts.” Therefore, he “wished that a less mausoleumesque world than ‘museum’ could be found for the name.”<sup>44</sup> After a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Read saw that institution’s perceived failures as a reason to avoid the word museum. Minutes record his impression of the “too great importance taken by trustees and wealthy protectors of the Museum of Mod. Art N.Y.” and the “[d]anger of static institution, danger of something too big.”<sup>45</sup> As a consequence, the name was changed from the “Museum of Contemporary Arts,” before finally settling on the “Institute of Contemporary Arts.”<sup>46</sup> There was more at stake here than semantic quibbles or calculated branding within the postwar institutional market-place for art. Brunius’ association between museum and mausoleum, working with the logic of the Surrealist pun, and the general awareness of the problematic centrality of the museum in the development of modernism, anticipates Adorno’s 1955 essay, “Valéry Proust Museum”, in which he wrote that “[m]useum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association.” In German “the word *museal* [*museumlike*] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying.”<sup>47</sup> André Malraux offered a more positive vision of the relationship between modern art, the museum, and mass culture in his 1947 *Le Musée Imaginaire*. For him, the museum gave birth to modern art. It was where Manet saw was the “picturalisation du monde” (“the picturing of the world”), the complement of Mallarmé’s declaration that “Le monde est fait pour aboutir à un beau livre” (“The world was made in order to result in a beautiful book”).<sup>48</sup> And this too was Malraux’s postwar proposal for his “imaginary museum”: colour photography and reproduction would transform the limited museum into an infinite and beautiful book, in which all art could be placed in an eternal continuum.

The initial drafts of what was first called the I.C.A.'s "Manifesto"<sup>49</sup> show the Committee formulating their own position on these questions of modernism and the museum, acknowledging its role in shaping the public understanding of art and modes of spectatorship and association: "the fact is that the public has not learnt the idiom of modern art: its signs, symbols and verbal idiom are only incomprehensible because people will seek, through ignorance, to interpret them in the wrong way."<sup>50</sup> Both Adorno's pessimistic understanding of modernism's deathly relation to the museum and Malraux's optimistic placing of modernism within a universal book of art were to be rejected in favour of an art of permanent change: "What is 'normal' (in the arts as in everything else) is change, the perpetual evolution and alteration of style." What was central to the local moment of postwar Britain was the conviction that "the spirit of the time speaks (not always consciously) through the mouths of all artists...and therefore art must not be a luxury enjoyed only by the few." Only if this was achieved could the proposed institute "make an essential contribution to the spiritual life of post-war England."<sup>51</sup> "Its function," the draft continued, "would not be retrospective, or propagandist. Rather, it would be co-operative, creative and educational in the real sense of the world, and for the benefit of the community."<sup>52</sup> Exhibitions would not be confined to the traditional fine arts, they would "include book illustration, mural decoration, theatrical sets, architectural models – everything which is visual."<sup>53</sup> This populist attention to "everything which is visual" would, as we shall see, prove to be the most prophetic description of the I.C.A.'s contribution to artistic theory and practice. As discussed above, it had its origins in Read's reading of Worringer's advocacy of attention to the entire "grammar" of culture. Such statements, and their theoretical grounding, make it difficult to accept Anne Massey's claims that "the I.C.A. pursued...an elitist and purist route by promoting European modernism in Britain."<sup>54</sup> This is accentuated by

backwardly projecting Read's later, more conservative views on modern art. That Massey can describe this both as a belief that "there was a Neo-Platonic essence to all 'good' art and design", as well as being based on "Aristotelian philosophy", should provide one caution not to take Read's often contradictory later writings at face value, as well as not to anachronistically interpret the early years of the I.C.A. in terms of this admittedly muddled work.<sup>55</sup> The art and design based framework of Massey's account, wherein "modernism...refers to the achievements of the European avant-garde in the early part of the twentieth-century...which had little acceptance during the interwar years...in Britain" also occludes the perspectives obtained by considering modernism as a more interdisciplinary project.<sup>56</sup> For example, the equally British Surrealist influenced project of Mass Observation, which has received much critical attention, was hugely focused on popular culture and ordinary life.<sup>57</sup> Although Nick Hubble has shown how Humphrey Jennings's hostility to Read was an important moment in the foundation of Mass Observation, the I.C.A.'s populist attention to "everything which is visual", as well the interest of both organisations in the blurring of disciplinary boundaries, might provide grounds for an institutional comparison.<sup>58</sup> Another consequence of projecting back Read's later attitude is Massey's claim that "[t]he founders of the ICA, in particular Herbert Read, maintained that the role of the Institute should be to educate the public of the achievements of the European avant-garde – achievements which they never believed could be surpassed."<sup>59</sup> In contrast, these discussions show repeatedly the desire not to be "retrospective", the belief that there was much room for "experiment" across the arts in Britain, and that the goal of the ICA was to produce the unknown art of the future. Such is what Read had in mind when he announced in a letter to *The Times* on June 26 1947 that the I.C.A. "will differ from existing institutions in that it will initiate definite projects, not merely collect and exhibit the chance productions of isolated artists."<sup>60</sup> This shows the I.C.A. attempting to institutionally support a permanently

developing modernism in ways that would break with what Lawrence Rainey has described as the previous generation of Anglo-American modernists' use of capitalist patronage and market manipulation.<sup>61</sup> The I.C.A. was to be funded by annual subscription, with different levels of contribution, but this quickly had to be supplemented with annual grants from the newly established Arts Council, accepted on a strict policy of non-interference, and less publicised "anonymous donations" from Committee members such as Roland Penrose.<sup>62</sup>

Read's hostility to the deadening effect of a permanent collection may have been an attempt to make a virtue of a vice. Whether through State support or private patronage, postwar Britain was hardly ripe with potential capital or donors. Nevertheless, as Read declared at the opening of the I.C.A.'s first exhibition, "Forty Years of Modern Art 1907-1947" in 1948: "We need an institution to protect the freedom of art." "Capitalism", he continued, "created entertainment industries, but the form of society which we call democratic has not evolved institutions which normally and naturally seek artistic expression." The ideal was "not another museum, another bleak exhibition gallery, another classical building in which insulated and classified specimens of culture are displayed for instruction, but an adult play-centre, a workshop where work is joy, a source of vitality and daring experiment."<sup>63</sup> That December saw a second launch exhibition, *40,000 Years of Modern Art: A Comparison of Primitive and Modern*. As the title suggests, Read was here less self-aware about the exhibition's institutional position. With the paradoxical title, he was suggesting that "like conditions produce like effects, and, more specifically, that there are conditions in modern life which have produced effects only to be seen in primitive epochs." These conditions, Read continued, "can be described as a vague sense of insecurity, a cosmic anguish (*Angst*, as the Existentialists call it), feelings and intuitions that demand expression in abstract or even naturalistic

forms.”<sup>64</sup> However, the exhibition was not only framed in what Massey terms “such white, male, western attitudes to the art of the other...[which were] a founding principle of modernism and ... which found currency at the ICA.”<sup>65</sup> In their catalogue essay, Robert Melville and W.G. Archer offered a different understanding of the African and Melanesian masks and sculptures on show: “These are not the result of a primitive will to form or of an exercise in romantic abstraction. They are in every case determined by the social functions of the mask or figure.” These social functions can be understood by understanding artefacts as “uncanny signs” and “compound images,” and it is such a psychoanalytically informed interpretive approach, already shown by Melville in his 1939 *Picasso and the Phantom*, that was used to analyse Melanesian totems, the paintings of de Chirico and the sculptures of Henry Moore.<sup>66</sup> Such contradictory approaches partake of what Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush have described as modernism’s creation of the primitive to contemplate “the prehistories of its future”, a rhetoric of futurity which was central to the I.C.A.’s self image and which would continue in Banham’s histories of the future.<sup>67</sup> Subsequent lectures on contemporary Egyptian painting in October 1949, and exhibitions of new art from Haiti and lectures on the music of Nigeria in March 1951, are testimony of attention to non-Western art and visual culture in its contemporary manifestations, not merely as foils for the modernist primitivism imagination.

With respect to Western modernist painting, the curatorial attitude of these launch exhibitions were decidedly pluralist, ranging across styles and movements, taking in the abstraction of Nicholson and Mondrian, the Vorticism of Epstein and Lewis, the Expressionism of Klee, Marc, Kokoschka, and Sutherland, and the perhaps expected prominence of various strands of Surrealism: de Chirico, Dali, Ernst, and of course Picasso. What was also notable was the conscious and from the present perspective remarkably prescient promotion of a new generation of British (and Irish) painters,

among them Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Louis Le Brocquy, and Eduardo Paolozzi. These painters were shown in *London-Paris: New Trends in Painting and Sculpture* from March 7th to April 4th, 1950 at the New Burlington Galleries, and in *1950: Aspects of British Art*, which ran from December 13th 1950 to 11 January 1951.<sup>68</sup> In one of the I.C.A.'s contribution to the Festival of Britain, *Ten Decades: A Review of British Taste 1851-1951*, held from 10 August to 27 September 1951, artists heavily promoted by the I.C.A. such as Henry Moore, Bacon and Paolozzi concluded the survey. This suggests that rather than coding this exhibition, and the I.C.A.'s position more generally within the debates around national identity omnipresent in the Festival, in terms of British versus European identity, it is more accurate to view such interventions as part of the wider rhetoric of futurity that Becky Conekin argues characterised the Festival's modernist "autobiography of a nation."<sup>69</sup> Conekin's account of the way in which this public display of modernist design and architecture were explicitly presented as part of the Labour Party's social democratic agenda indicate that the I.C.A.'s promotion of a reconstructed modernism as the "unknown art of the future: was part of a much wider popular diffusion of modernism in postwar Britain. The experience of the American poet and filmmaker James Broughton at the I.C.A. further evinces its role in providing a home for populist artistic experimentation. In October 1951 the I.C.A hosted the first screenings of Broughton's films *Mother's Day* (1948), *Adventures of Jimmy* (1951), *Loony Tom* (1951), *The Happy Lover*, (1951), *Four in the Afternoon* (1951). Along with his friends Robert Creeley and Kenneth Anger, Broughton had left the oppressive atmosphere of McCarthy-era California for Britain, where his films were hailed not only at the I.C.A., but also by John Grierson and Paul Rotha. Broughton recalled in his memoirs, "after the glum indifference to my work in the U.S.A., the articulate approval of Britain exhilarated me," and he went on to make the *Pleasure Garden* (1953) with Lindsay Anderson, a playful tribute to the Crystal Palace Terraces.<sup>70</sup> The I.C.A. went on to become a channel for the

introduction of American experimental cinema into Britain, showing films by Maya Deren in 1952, and Kenneth Anger in 1955.<sup>71</sup> These films show that even before the meetings of the Independent Group, the I.C.A. was directing its attention to the populist, playful, and cinematic aspects of the American visual avant-garde.

Members of the Independent Group first began to participate in this program of exhibitions when the I.C.A. moved to its first permanent home at 17-18 Dover Street in 1950. A permanent home facilitated a huge rise in activity. Minutes note “that the number of events arranged for any one month in the I.C.A.’s program for 1951 is almost exactly equivalent to the number of similar events held during the entire year previously.” Membership rose too, from 400 in 1950 to 1,400 in 1951.<sup>72</sup> The new premises were opened with an exhibition that typified the ways in which the I.C.A. connected the pre- and post-war artistic avant-gardes. *James Joyce: His Life and Work* presented portraits, letters and manuscripts of Joyce’s work, but what prevented this from becoming a stifling act of cultural hagiography was that it marked the first involvement of Richard Hamilton with the I.C.A., who was then studying at the Slade School of Art. Hamilton curated the exhibition, designed the foldout poster/catalogue, and displayed a series of preparatory drawings which he had made for an projected illustrated edition of *Ulysses*. However, his proposal was rejected by Faber & Faber, when T.S. Eliot, who also opened the exhibition, pointed out to him the huge cost of resetting an already notoriously difficult typescript.<sup>73</sup> Hamilton had first read Joyce while on army service in 1947, and he was an important influence on his work throughout his life. “Joyce,” he later said, “wanted to be all-inclusive” and it was what Hamilton saw as Joyce’s attention to popular culture, to the everyday, and to the ordinary, which shaped his developing Pop aesthetic. There is a clear Joycean ring to his declaration of purpose in 1962: “I would like to think of my purpose as a search for what is epic in everyday objects and

everyday attitudes. Irony has no place in it except insofar as irony is part of the ad man's repertoire."<sup>74</sup> Joyce as the creator of the original modernist ad-man was the Joyce presented to the I.C.A. in 1950. The poster signals its "Approach to James Joyce" by the layout of its blocks of text and photographs in newspaper columns, the design style alluding to the "Aelous" episode set in the print room of the *Freeman's Journal*. These columns are underlain with "Joyce" in bright-yellow Futura, the typeface invented at the Bauhaus by Paul Renner in 1928, celebrating the modernity of Bloom's role as an advertising salesman. In a drawing such as "In Horne's House", illustrating the "Oxen of the Sun" episode, Hamilton adopted Cubist visual forms, anticipating his later studies of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), to express the episode's flow of historical movement, an approach he later revised in favour of a pastiche of styles: "Joyce's readiness to ape the manner of other writers and genres had long since freed me from inhibitions of about the personal mark that every painter is supposed to strive for."<sup>75</sup> While this interpretation of *Ulysses*' modernity lying in its embrace of popular culture, advertising, and the disposable world of print would be later explored by critics such as Cheryl Herr and R.B. Kershner, it was, needless to say, at odds with the critical judgements of academic contemporaries such as Harry Levin, for whom Joyce represents the "need to create a city of art, a Byzantium."<sup>76</sup>

The initial lure of Joyce brought Hamilton into closer involvement with the I.C.A., and in 1949 he proposed his own exhibition, *Growth and Form*, which was shown in 1951 as part of the I.C.A.'s contribution to the Festival of Britain. As Isabelle Moffat has shown, while *Growth and Form*'s use of images from microscopic, biological, and geological worlds can be understood as part of the Festival of Britain's wider public iconography of scientific progress, its initial impetus came very much from Hamilton's own interests and readings.<sup>77</sup> Joyce again was a decisive inspiration. In his proposal for

the exhibition written to Read, Hamilton wrote how the “initial stimulus” for the exhibition came from D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*, a compendium of scientific images: “[t]he visual interest of this field, where biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics overlap, was considered an excellent subject of presentation in purely visual terms...the painter and the sculptor have much to gain from the enlargement of their world of experience by an appreciation of the forms in nature beyond their immediate visual environment.”<sup>78</sup> These images revealed by new visual technologies opened up for Hamilton “visual expression of the idea of periodicity in its relation to the individual and to historical patterns of species”, and he claimed that “Thompson’s remarks on this subject are a synopsis of Joycean philosophy”:

The differences of form, and changes of form, which are brought about by varying rates (or “laws”) of growth, are essentially the same phenomena whether they be episodes in the life-history of the individual, or manifest themselves as the distinctive characteristics of what we call separate species of the race.<sup>79</sup>

The resulting exhibition saw the I.C.A.’s exhibition space plastered with photographic reproductions and cinematic projections of examples of “Mathematical Form”, “Crystal Structure”, “Fluid Forms”, all the way up “Single Cells and Molluscs”, in what might be interpreted as a more abstract attempt to provide a visual analogue of Joyce’s “Oxen of the Sun” episode. The exhibition was a critical success, inspiring a symposium on its ideas featuring Konrad Lorenz, Rudolf Arnheim and E.H. Gombrich, who offered an early presentation of his famous “hobby horse” theory of artistic form as functional substitution.<sup>80</sup> An important aspect of *Growth and Form* was this use of the exhibition and installation form in itself; as Hamilton later wrote, it was “an ideal subject of another involvement of that time, exhibition design. By the turn of the century [i.e. the fifties] the

‘exhibition’ was beginning to be understood as a form in its own right with unique properties.”<sup>81</sup> This statement could be generalized to account for the wider importance of the exhibition as a practice for the early I.C.A. Intentionally without a permanent collection, but committed to re-constructing an earlier generation of modernist practice with a view to the future, the exhibition offered an ideal format, producing a fleeting, ephemeral constellation linking the art of a previous generation to the present without calcifying it into what Read described as the “static” nature of a Museum of Modern Art.

### 3. Histories of the Future

Hal Foster has written that “[t]he principle legacy of the Independent Group might well be its ‘art’ of discussion, design and display.”<sup>82</sup> Yet this, as the early years of the I.C.A. show, did not develop *sui generis*, but was in fact one of the ways in which the I.C.A. as an institution shaped the practices of the Independent Group. While the content of their exhibitions soon exchanged Picasso for pictures of television sets, there is an important continuity in the use of the exhibition as a medium to link pre- and postwar war avant-gardes; Paul Klee’s etchings hanging beside said televisions. This was one of the juxtapositions that appeared in the exhibition *Parallel of Life and Art*, which took place in the I.C.A. from September 11<sup>th</sup> to October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1953 curated by Paolozzi, Henderson and the Smithsons. Banham defined it as the ‘locus classicus’ for New Brutalist architecture and the idea of the “As Found”, and it played a catalysing role in the theorization of Pop Art.<sup>83</sup> That term was first coined by the Smithsons in 1956; that it was coined in an essay entitled “But today we collect ads”, indicates the formative role of their collecting, curating and exhibition of images.<sup>84</sup> The exhibition presented a mass of photographic images, from football matches and Muybridge studies to the images of natural forms seen in Hamilton’s *Growth and Form*. In his review, Banham compared it to

Malraux's "Imaginary Museum", but one which contained "transient human occurrences like gymnasia and coronations...of worlds beyond human vision, as in ultra-microscopy or extreme range astronomy."<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Malraux was invited to the opening, an appearance which would have highlighted the transition from Brunius and Read's earlier theorisations of the museum as mausoleum to an imaginary museum of mass culture. However, there were also important continuities between Read, Mesens and Penrose's "Surrealism as a theoretical practice" and the strategies of *Parallel of Life and Art*, not least Peter Smithson's claim to be an "inheritor of Paris." Penrose's blurring of the boundaries between art and life with his war-time mannequins, Read's urge toward disciplinary synthesis, and above all the declaration of interest in "everything which is visual" were all given realisation in the exhibition. The blurring of disciplinary boundaries through juxtaposition was particularly striking: close-ups of the comparable visual forms of Etruscan ceramics, fossils, cells, and Klee paintings suggesting a common method of interpretation. Years later, the Smithsons also stressed the "continuity" felt by themselves, Paolozzi and Henderson at the time with "the Bloomsbury Group, [moving] from Paris of the 1930s and 1940s, from Marcel Duchamp, from early Dubuffet, and so on..."<sup>86</sup> A photograph Dubuffet's *Corps de dame* (1950) did indeed appear tacked up in the exhibition.

*Parallel of Life and Art*, then, was a highly influential event for the development of many strands of postwar visual art and theory, but what has so far has elided notice is how, as with the case of Hamilton's early exhibitions, another key modernist influence was Joyce. In their exhibition notes, the Smithsons recorded that *Stephen Hero's* "movement I call epiphany", defined as "[a] reality behind the appearance", inspired the presentation of ordinary visual material that has "sunk below the threshold of conscious perception." Reintroducing the spectator to these "visual by-products of our way of

thinking” would reveal the epiphanic potential of the images of everyday life.<sup>87</sup> Joyce appeared again in their theorization of Pop Art, in the wry observation that “[t]o understand the advertisements which appear in the *New Yorker* or *Gentry* one must have taken a course in Dublin literature.”<sup>88</sup> Their appropriation of the model of the Joycian epiphany – for it was an appropriation from the literary to the visual, with the inevitable change in meaning that entails – gives one indication, then, of what the Smithsons at least saw as the function of the exhibition. The world of images, sunk below conscious perception, formed a variation of what Walter Benjamin termed the “optical unconscious.”<sup>89</sup> The archive of mass imagery had become a form of collective postwar British unconscious, and the role of the didactic curator, in juxtaposing and recontextualising them, was to raise them back to consciousness, liberating their potential for the subjects of the future. Alison Smithson would in particular develop this form of the training of consciousness in her “sensitivity primers,” first as part of the architectural collective Team 10, and later to realise the potential of car travel in 1983’s *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road*.<sup>90</sup> In this photo-novel, she would cast herself as the postwar Virginia Woolf, who instead of altering her perception on walks around London, would attempt to discover the new modes of perception and mobility – especially those for a mother – enabled by driving around Britain’s motorway network.

M. Christine Boyer has recently begun to draw attention to Alison Smithson not only as an architect and theorist, but as a writer who produced decades of polemical, often pseudonymous, but always highly crafted and poetic essays.<sup>91</sup> Alison Smithson, however, was also a novelist, with *A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl* published by Chatto & Windus in 1966 and several other works remaining in her archive. That novel’s gestation, however, came much earlier and was directly bound up with her activities in the I.C.A. in the fifties, and indeed, as the title suggests, was a direct response

to and in a sense a female rewriting of Joyce. As she later recalled, in the period between *Parallel of Life and Art* (1953) and *This Is Tomorrow* (1956), when she was reflecting on the “sort of ‘nonsensical’ explosion in use of images and words that was happening” what she termed “the ‘as-found’ manuscripts of *Young Girl* started, in frustration at the Bates House...not building.”<sup>92</sup> The novel has completely dropped off the radar of accounts of British postwar fiction, but re-introducing it to literary history, and seeing at one of as one of the most original literary outcomes of the I.C.A.’s early years, bound up as the novel is with concerns with the “as found”, with continuing modernism through its transformation, and with popular culture, would begin to alter understanding of a period still approached in the self-validating terms of the largely male Movement and New Wave.<sup>93</sup> Her work certainly stands out in comparison with the other comparatively meagre successes the I.C.A. had in promoting literature and literary interactions with the other arts. It was not as if under Read’s direction the I.C.A. did not attempt to sustain the “impetus of the Modern Movement” in literature through poetry readings, lectures and exhibitions. But there was a glaring contrast between success in the fields of visual art and culture as opposed to literature. In 1953 Banham organised a series of “Seminars on Aesthetic Problems in Contemporary Art.” Speakers and topics included Banham himself on “The Impact of Technology”, Hamilton on “New Sources of Form”, Toni del Renzio on “Non-Formal” Painting and Lawrence Alloway on “The Human Image.”<sup>94</sup> Dorothy Morland, then the I.C.A.’s director, noting the popularity of the seminars, and how they were stimulating the work of the Independent Group, proposed the idea of a similar “series on literature.”<sup>95</sup> The aim was to promote the I.C.A.’s ideal of interdisciplinarity in literature. Organised by Stephen Spender and Kathleen Raine, survey letters were sent out asking: “Does he [the writer] feel that modern writers are sufficiently aware of contemporary ideas in his particular field, and whether, if aware, they are aware in the right way?”<sup>96</sup> Proposed speakers were Conor Cruise O’Brien on

Catholicism, Iris Murdoch on Existentialism, or Gilbert Ryle on Logical Positivism.

However, the only talk which took place was by John Heath-Stubbs on “Poetic Symbols and Techniques” in March 1954, whose admission that the present was a time of “consolidation” in poetry was criticised by David Jones, who said in shying away from experimentation and the legacy of modernism, contemporary poets “were merely side-stepping the problems because they were afraid to face them.”<sup>97</sup>

But perhaps David Jones simply did not know the right poets, or rather, perhaps he didn't know the right novelists. In Alison Smithson's *Portrait*, these problems are neither side-stepped, nor confronted head on, but nimbly negotiated and made part of the fiction itself. The novel is made up, according to the opening of its third section, of the “freewheeling, dredging, seaweed slinging, kind of stories.” “Thus,” the narrative continues, “she had told herself one long story, over and over again until it was perfect...that very strange formation, called ‘her upbringing’.”<sup>98</sup> The novel doesn't tell stories about her upbringing, rather her upbringing is a practice of story telling. In the first section of the novel, a fifteen year old girl goes to bed over and over again in order to dream to escape her life, summed up as “‘Get married.’ ‘Have a baby.’”<sup>99</sup> These dreams are romantic stories, set in Victorian Britain, more Barbara Cartland than the Brontës. But they are not parody, or pastiche; through them she charts growing up in the suburbs of the fifties ruled, in a nice period touch, by Bakelite television sets.<sup>100</sup> These stories are her erotic life – “she always reached out for herself eventually” – and the frustration of one is the frustration of the other. Her dream stories, however, are not only frustrated by the limitations of her suburban life.<sup>101</sup> They are frustrated by the kind of Victorian narratives that are the only ones she knows: “the girl could never quite finish her stories because once it was fixed for her to marry is rather took the story away.” Looking out a window, she has intimations of her limitations: “Modern art and

literature was very good at remaking in one's own image this kind of situation. 'But what is my own image?'"<sup>102</sup> Modern art, here conceived as a archive for the postwar woman to draw on to escape the patriarchal narratives of the past, a remaking of images, remains closed off for the girl of first section. The second section is one long story, set in North Africa. Here, the protagonist Robin's decision to seduce and marry an older French officer has a Pintereqsue ending, with the officer making love to a young man, and Robin reduced to a pregnant asset. The third and final section comments back on these attempts at stories, while giving fleeting glimpses of the life of a woman of the present, married to a racing car driver. The freedom represented by the car recurs throughout the novel. "I love moving...[in] whatever polemical car"; "this love-life of movement was always"; "This dreaming – this movement – hard to keep with it. My mind sways like a tart like a car on English road."<sup>103</sup> The Smithsons writings on urbanism had as early as 1957 demanded "aesthetics of change", and although in this novel it is symbolised by the automobile, it also has important echoes with the I.C.A.'s belief that what is normal in the arts in perpetual change.<sup>104</sup> There are parallels here too with the contemporaneous novels *Between* (1968) by Christine Brooke-Rose and *In Transit* (1969) by Brigid Brophy, where the movement opened up by new technology becomes an emblem for women's intellectual liberation, as well as the motivation for a repetitious, flickering, blurred narrative style. Indeed, Brophy's novel alludes to the Smithsons when the narrator nominates "that sort-of-pop-brutalistic tabbying" as the nearest thing to a twentieth-century style.<sup>105</sup> Like these two novels, however, the freedom achieved by their female narrators remains frustrated and provisional. In the latter stages of the novel, the narrator reflects "I never felt this thrill of women's freedom." In love with "the middle half of the twentieth century", she "was under the generation of the trained women acting as a house wife...half-accepted freedom, house floundered cut-off from society half explored."<sup>106</sup> Perhaps the novel's most prescient move is to map this generation of "half-

freed” women, poised on the cusp of second-wave feminism, onto a narrative of the potential of the avant-garde, the continuation of the ability of modern art to “remake one’s own image.” At her husband’s car rally, the narrator reflects that “the ‘elder’s’ see nothing but disagreement among the avant-garde: not the proper spirit. Meanwhile the middle, by-passed generation, alternatively give advice to both sides, manoeuvre both sides into position and tell tales out of it.”<sup>107</sup> This mediation between the “elder’s” and a new avant-garde could stand as a description of Alison Smithson’s position at the I.C.A. in the fifties, and of the mid-century reconstruction of modernism. The novel ends, however, on a discordant note: “Born myself again in my own image; still I am not satisfied.”<sup>108</sup> If in this novel of dreaming and memory, modern art is figured as a archive to be drawn on in order to remake one’s image, and the potential self-image of a new generation of women, the disjointed narratives and sections of the novel suggest that it might not be enough in the face of the pressures of marriage and the prevention of access to the symbolic and economic possibilities of the automobile.

Brophy was not the only novelist to take inspiration from the Smithsons’ “pop-brutalistic tabbying.” In B. S. Johnson’s *Christie Malry’s Own Double Entry* (1973) the narrator opines that the novel should be “Funny, Brutalist and Short.”<sup>109</sup> As Jonathan Coe observes, the Smithsons mattered to Johnson not only as architects, but as polemical theorists – that is, as writers. Johnson’s description of them as having to “overcome the opposition of a previous generation ... [and] to have ideas accepted that are an extension and development of that generation” is indeed, as Coe writes, a description of Johnson’s own position in the mid-sixties.<sup>110</sup> Johnson sent a copy of his second novel, *Albert Angelo* (1964), to the Smithsons, writing that “my position in the avant-garde of my profession resembles that of yours of architecture.”<sup>111</sup> Johnson’s adulation of the couple culminated in his production of an awkwardly hagiographic documentary about their theories of

urbanism for the B.B.C. in 1970. In light of this, the novel can be read as Johnson's version of the task outlined in Smithson's *A Portrait*: to manoeuvre between the elders, represented in *Albert Angelo* by an epigraph from Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953), and the new avant-garde towards which Johnson aspired. As scholars have developed ever more detailed historical accounts of the institutionalization and transformation of modernism in postwar Britain, Johnson has emerged as one of the period's most compelling writers, working at the intersections of a self-consciously avant-garde literary coterie, the international film circuit, and mass cultural television broadcasting.<sup>112</sup> Another reason for Johnson's increasing contemporary resonance lies in *Albert Angelo*'s depictions of a multi-cultural city populated by Greek Cypriots, West Indians, Somalis, West Africans, all "Londoners like us," anticipating later London novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003).<sup>113</sup> Refracted through the thoughts of the eponymous protagonist, a struggling architect working as a temporary teacher in order to get by, the novel explores and analyses the urban fabric of London, attending, in a manner close to the Smithsons' theories of urbanism, to the patterns of life and built fabric that already exist in the city, rather than imposing a pre-existing form upon it. The centrality of the Smithsons and their successors Archigram to the disciplines of postwar architectural history and theory suggests that a similar position can be attained for Johnson, should this process of detailed historical reconstruction continue. There are, for example, important similarities between Archigram's advocacy of a "plug-in" architecture of "open-ends" and Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), a book in a book consisting of 27 unbound sections through which the reader navigates her own path.<sup>114</sup>

In his 1967 statement of principles, "Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?," Johnson emphasized that "[t]he architects can teach us something": Louis Sullivan's dictum that "*Form follows function*", and Mies van der Rohe's similar belief

that “*To create form out of the nature of our tasks with the methods of our time – this is our task* [italics original].” The function of the novelist, as Johnson saw it, was to “evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality.” For Johnson, “[c]hange is a condition of life...change simply *is*.”<sup>115</sup> This was his version of the I.C.A.’s belief that “what normal...is change,” or the Smithsons’ demand for “an aesthetics of change,” positions that were generated out of a specific interpretation and re-construction of modernism. Johnson’s borrowing from architecture is clear in *Albert Angelo*. Like the Smithsons, who had little of their projects actually built, but who became famous for their writings and unrealized plans, Albert is introduced as paper architect, designing buildings that will not be built now, but in the future: “[l]ike poets, after they’re dead.”<sup>116</sup> The novel opens by positing Albert as the creator of an archive of the future, sounding one of its major themes. Albert as an architect also draws on the past as an archive, a file of drawings and novels from which he tries to design for the future. His bookshelf contains “Mies, Corbu, Bannister bloody Fletcher...Beckett, O’Brien, Sterne – oh what the hell. My problems are my problems.”<sup>117</sup> That interjection expresses the concern of *Albert Angelo* as a novel: how to look back, and borrow from other disciplines, in order to continue a project of novelistic experimentation after Beckett and O’Brien.

One formal strategy in which this takes place has been described by Philip Tew, who shows that the essays presented in the novel as the work of Albert’s pupils are verbatim copies of those collected by Johnson while working as a teacher. Tew sees this as “adapting or extending the notion of the *objet trouvé*,” but it might more accurately be described as an extension and development of that technique into the “as found” strategy that Alison Smithson used in her own literary work.<sup>118</sup> As in the curatorial practices of *Parallel of Life and Art*, Surrealist practice is both continued but repurposed

for the strategies of postwar writing. Johnson draws on another key tenet of the Smithsons' architecture, one that stands as a meta-principle for the novel's relationship towards modernism. In one of the novel's typographically innovative double column sections, where events in a classroom are reported in one column, Albert's thoughts in another, Albert rejects the technique of cladding, thinking that "*form should be honest, should be honestly exposed* [italics original]."<sup>119</sup> In this he alludes to a key principle of New Brutalism, extended, as we have seen, from the earlier modernism of Sullivan and Mies: the exposure, for moral and ethical reasons, of the materials used to construct a building.<sup>120</sup> For Banham, this was New Brutalism's Welfare State "ethic and aesthetic," and it is the conjoined "ethic and aesthetic" of Johnson's fiction.<sup>121</sup> As shown by the holes cut through the pages of *Albert Angelo*, which reveal future events in the novel in a very obvious way, Johnson's fiction is utterly honest about its will to experimentation, about its predecessors and influences, and its technical strategies. Johnson stressed this point in "Aren't You Rather Young": his technical devices "are clear enough to the reader who will think about them," and that essay describes the choice and motivation of his formal strategies. If this departs from a modernist ideal of the author as "invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, pairing his fingernails," then it does so for a different conjoining of ethics and aesthetics: the belief that the reader will be more receptive to experimentation if she sees the form "*honestly exposed*."<sup>122</sup> This is one of Johnson's most important critical principles, one which emphasizes the ethical role of fictional theory in postwar justifications of literary innovation. Yet this exposure is that of artifice rather than autobiography. As he wrote of his later novel *Trawl* (1966): "the publisher wished to classify it as an autobiography, not as a novel. It is a novel."<sup>123</sup> The ethic and aesthetic of exposure lies behind the novel's famous concluding "almighty aposiopesis". After utilizing the techniques of first, second, and third person narration, and of presenting material "as found", the text explodes: "fuck all this lying look what im

really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture.”<sup>124</sup> Except that, this very rejection of “covering up covering up covering up” echoes Albert’s early statement of architectural honesty, thus ironizing a passage that might initially be read as a desire for authenticity. What is being exposed is the form of the novel, and this is the novel’s truth, thus making sense of Johnson’s statement that “I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.”<sup>125</sup> As we have seen, Albert’s architectural honesty develops from specific historical conjuncture, a distinctly British moment in the reception of modernism. It is not by accident that Albert remembers taking Jenny, his ex-girlfriend, “to a lecture on modern architecture at the I.C.A.”<sup>126</sup> That allusion is meant to signal a whole decade of institutional reconstruction of modernism across the arts, its mutation into the Independent Group, and a complex sense that in this very process of reconstruction, modernism becomes an archive for Johnson’s writing of the future of the postwar novel.

## Conclusion

In 1955, Lawrence Alloway became assistant director of the I.C.A., an ascension which marked the end of the Independent Group’s activities. After 1956’s exhibition *This Is Tomorrow*, its members dispersed. At the end of the fifties the I.C.A.’s program quickly moved onto the introduction of Situationism, Cybernetics and Structuralism, and home-grown investigations into mass cultural product design which saw little continuation with the products or theoretical strategies of what Banham defined as “the First Machine Age.” Indeed, it is Banham’s work which offers the most succinct analysis of the Janus-faced attitude of the artists associated with the I.C.A. in the fifties. His first perception, as early as 1955, was to note the role of institutionalisation and historicisation in producing the “modernism” that artists and writers of the fifties were wrestling with. In

his definition of New Brutalism, he wrote that the work of architectural historians such as Siegfried Gideon had “created the idea of the Modern Movement...and beyond that offered a rough classification of the ‘isms’ which are the thumb-print of Modernity.”<sup>127</sup> His point is obvious, but it is worth repeating. The idea of the “modern movement”, that is, the belief that the proliferating, opposed and contradictory developments across the arts in the first half of the twentieth century are united in bearing (in a lovely turn of phrase) the thumb-print of Modernity is the retrospective construction of the mid-century. In this sense, the Smithsons and Johnson as much as Gideon and Read are historians of modernism, producing the past in claiming it as the source for the future, whether in order to show in Read’s words the “perpetual evolution and alteration of style,” or the Smithsons’ “aesthetic of change.” In a 1961 address to the R.I.B.A., entitled “The History of the Immediate Future,” Banham looked back on the previous decade’s historical reconstructions of an interdisciplinary modernism, distinguishing two divergent results. Of the Smithsons, he observed that “[a]ccusations of modern movement historicism can be made to lie very close to the Brutalists – at least in some of their works and particularly in the early and middle ‘50s.” This “neo-historicism,” what he called “the delights of do-it-yourself modern movement history” threatened to result in an attitude to modernism that was merely “aesthetic” – and nothing could be a worse insult coming from Banham.<sup>128</sup> Yet he advocated another approach to the history of modernism, “not because history repeats itself – it is, fortunately, impossible to make the same mistake twice (though that doesn’t prevent anyone from making progressively worse mistake as time goes on.” “History” rather, “is to the future as the observed results of an experiment are to the plotted graph.” The constant re-observation and reconstruction of the past – of the modernist past – continually alters our predictions of its future. His analogy yokes this distinctive mid-century temporality to the progressive, technological and utopian understanding of modernism which Banham advocated. It is

through the constant generation of change that “[h]istory is our only guide to the future.”<sup>129</sup>

Banham was a glorious essayist, a woefully understudied developer of one the most distinctive literary styles in British letters in the late fifties and early sixties, equivalent perhaps to Tom Wolfe, a writer he one of the first to praise.<sup>130</sup> Here is his dismissal of the Italian craze of the period: ‘Once upon a *dreadful* day, a tall dark neo-Palladian yawned at the mention of ‘Divina Proporzione’, and the panic was on. It had been a terrible season: a ranking Brutalist had been rude about Alberti, a man at the ICA had described *Bicycle Thieves* as ‘creep’, *Vogue* had spoken up for ordinary coffee, and old Astragal had treated an exhibition of Italian industrial design with what sounded like tolerant amusement, instead of the loutish self-abasement required by protocol.’<sup>131</sup> Irony was his tone, and it dominated a poem he wrote for the *This Is Tomorrow* catalogue in 1956. It is a mock history of two strands of modernist aspirations, opening with the dream of: “HIS / authoritarian hegelian metaphysical / dream of gesamtkunstwerk great union of / all disciplines total art.” This is contrasted with “HERS...libertarian rousseuaistic mediaevalising...wills and hands in free association.” The fusion between the two is seen in “architecture painting sculpture / discipline / seen as one,” and his vision of the future is an

undifferentiated environment remains  
even within the space frame opens out  
ways beyond the arts

The poem closes with “you / end product / you.”<sup>132</sup> Of course, the poem’s tone mocks these aspirations; but it also simultaneously discards this irony, declaring a utopian

democratic future in an undifferentiated world beyond the arts. What Banham points to, and what perhaps was lacking in the search for the history of the future that I.C.A. and its descendants created, was the irony of such a move. Such irony might be the only possible attitude to take towards the ways in which the influence of literary modernists such as Joyce was re-appropriated and transformed by Hamilton and the Smithsons, and then recycled again by novelists like Johnson. Such movements between media cannot help but be aware of what is lost in such re-mediations: those formal qualities which defined the work's meaning in the first place. Nevertheless, no matter how ironic these syntheses and transformations between literary and visual modernisms were, they were one way in which modernism was transformed in postwar Britain, calling for a modernist historiography that moves between media and across the twentieth-century as easily as the Independent Group did themselves. The I.C.A.'s aspirations to create the modernist "unknown art of the future" in post-war Britain were ultimately realised, albeit in ways not initially imagined; but such is the ever changing nature of modernist histories of the future.

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