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Not Quite Architecture ... Cold War History, New Brutalist Ethics and 'Parallel of Life and Art', 1953

ABSTRACT

Today New Brutalism is most commonly remembered as an imposing post-war architectural style characterised by weighty structure, unfinished concrete façades and a compromised social legacy. Yet the conditions of its emergence in early-1950s Britain were equally artistic as architectural. Indeed, in the first major study of New Brutalism the critic Reyner Banham traced both its apogee and nadir to two museum-based exhibitions which although not quite art, were not quite architecture either. The exhibitions in question were 'Parallel of Life and Art', held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1953, and the exhibit *Patio & Pavilion* at 'This is Tomorrow' in 1956, both collaborations between two architects (Alison and Peter Smithson) and two artists (Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi). This paper will explore the implications of Banham's foregrounding of the earlier show, which despite his insistence occupies a marginal position in histories of both New Brutalism and post-war art and architecture in general.

'Parallel of Life' and Art consisted of some 150 grainy black and white photographic panels featuring subjects traversing the entire range and history of visual culture: from contemporary Irish bus stop design to Minahessa ideographic alphabets. These were hung in such a way as to preclude their ready apprehension by the viewer while overwriting the internal architecture of the gallery, the combined effect of which was the staging of a spatio-temporal breakdown. This paper will attend the precise nature of this breakdown in order to begin a wider reconsideration of New Brutalist inter-space, while providing a more nuanced account of the social dimensions of an architecture that historians have to date preferred to regard from the outside.

Introduction

Today New Brutalism is most commonly remembered as an imposing post-war architectural style characterised by weighty structure, unfinished concrete façades and a compromised social legacy. Yet few recall that the conditions of its emergence in early-1950s Britain were equally artistic as architectural. Indeed, in the first and to date only major study of the movement, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, the architectural historian Reyner Banham traced both its apogee and nadir to two museum-based exhibits that, although not quite art, were not quite architecture either. The exhibits in question were 'Parallel of Life and Art', held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in 1953, and *Patio & Pavilion*, shown as part of 'This is Tomorrow' at the Whitechapel Gallery, also in London, in 1956. Both were collaborations between two architects, Alison and Peter Smithson, and two artists, Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi. In this paper, I revisit the earlier show that, despite Banham's advocacy, occupies a marginal position in histories of post-war art and architecture. Furthermore, by examining the inter-spatial characteristics of this show, I aim to begin redressing the frequently misconstrued social and ethical dimensions of New Brutalism.

Parallel of Life and Art

'Parallel of Life and Art' opened at the ICA in September 1953. The show consisted of 122 large black and white photographs of subjects that traversed the entire range of visual culture: from Minahessa ideographic alphabets to contemporary urban design, from indigenous Australian bark painting to aerial landscape photography, and from contemporary art to microscopic views of cells and tumours. Each of the images included in the show had been photographed from a published source and enlarged to the point where loss of resolution threatened illegibility, while at the same time producing formal affinities and correspondences between otherwise unlike types.¹ Under these reproductive conditions, for example, a burlap painting by Alberto Burri appeared not dissimilar to a photograph taken from a military surveillance aircraft, or a microscopic cross-section of a plant. Or, as Nigel Henderson himself observed, 'the patterned surface of a guillemot's egg might resemble a drip painting by Jackson Pollock.'² These enlarged, visually ambiguous prints had been mounted on cardboard panels and installed elaborately around the gallery, where they protruded at odd angles from the walls, ceiling and floor, producing the effect of a three-dimensional montage.

The exhibition received considerable critical attention, and most reviewers interpreted the title, along with the ambiguity of the imagery, as proposing that human history and culture is determined by, or intrinsically linked to, the physical formation of the natural world as revealed by recent photographic and scientific technologies. Tom Hopkinson, writing in the *Manchester Guardian*, described the experience of the exhibition as akin to stumbling 'across a set of basic patterns for the universe',³ while the correspondent for *The Times* argued that the show demonstrated 'how the findings of the sciences and the arts are aspects of a simple cultural whole.'⁴ This position continues to echo in more recent accounts of the show, such as Julian Myers's conclusion that 'Parallel of Life and Art' identified molecular and geological substructures as somehow 'the evolutionary antecedents of modernist abstraction.'⁵

While the interpretive emphasis on the exhibition's title in these readings of the show as constituting the world as the product of a universal natural and historical order is perhaps understandable, it is nevertheless misplaced. There had been much indecision about what to call 'Parallel of Life and Art', and during the planning stages the exhibition had several different working titles, including 'Sources and Documents '53'. The final choice was, however, immediately regretted by the organisers for engendering precisely this critical response. As Nigel Henderson noted in an unpublished draft of a speech that he gave at an Architectural Association forum on the exhibition, 'our title which was very difficult to determine was a bad one ... leading people to an expectation of a much more compact and limited theme than we were in fact engaged upon.'⁶ In what follows, I aim to begin elaborating more

1. Henderson, 1977.

2. TGA: Nigel Henderson, MS, 'Notes on Parallel of Life and Art', Tate Gallery Archive (Hyman Kreitman Research Centre): Personal Papers of Nigel Graeme Henderson (1917–1985), 9211.5.1.5.

3. Hopkinson, 1953.

4. *The Times*, 1953.

5. Myers, 2000, p. 80.

6. TGA: Nigel Henderson, MS, 'Notes on Parallel of Life and Art', Tate Gallery Archive (Hyman Kreitman Research Centre): Personal Papers of Nigel Graeme Henderson (1917–1985), 9211.5.1.6.

precisely what the organisers *were* in fact engaged upon, arguing in particular that it was precisely this notion of a naturalised historical order, as manifest in recent Cold War visual culture, that was in fact being dismantled rather than reinforced.

Ways Beyond Art

A useful starting point is to locate 'Parallel of Life and Art' within the then recent history of photo-montage as applied to contemporary exhibition design.⁷ As numerous art historians, including Benjamin Buchloh, Christopher Phillips, Ulrich Pohlmann, and, most recently, Romy Golan, have charted, from the mid-1920s onwards, the avant-garde technique of photo-montage had proven particularly susceptible to ideological co-option across the political spectrum, and its once-revolutionary strategies of perceptual shock and/or mass enlightenment were quickly marshalled at architectural scale first by European totalitarianism (perhaps most notably in Fascist Italy) and subsequently by American democracy.⁸ Indeed, during the second half of World War II and throughout the early Cold War, the large-scale montage exhibition became a primary vehicle for the constitution and dissemination of American visions of a democratic world order.

Similarities between 'Parallel of Life and Art' and the American photographic exhibitions produced during this period have been noted previously. For example, Victoria Walsh has observed the close similarities between this exhibition and the immersive exhibition format pioneered by Herbert Bayer in particular, first at the Deutscher Werkbund and then, following his emigration to New York, at Museum of Modern Art in collaboration with Edward Steichen.⁹ Beginning with his well known 'field of vision' diagrams, Bayer developed a mode of exhibition in which large photographic panels derived primarily from *Life* magazine were densely hung so as to saturate the viewers' optical experience as they moved through space carefully

7. Regrounding this exhibition in the recent history of artistic rather, as is more customary, architectural practice is a deliberate strategy. Specifically, it is intended to loosen the vice-like historiographical grip within which Reyner Banham has long held both this exhibition and New Brutalism more generally. Few historians have exerted a more enduring authority over their subject than has Banham over New Brutalism. While, to be fair, his is an authority earned through brilliant, and brilliantly idiosyncratic analysis, it is also problematic in the case of 'Parallel of Life and Art', because Banham's writing was always and ultimately in the service of architectural not art history. Banham's legacy is thus a large body of writing by a second and third generation of architectural historians whose work insistently places this exhibition within contemporary architectural discourse and debates while overlooking the fact that two of its four organisers were equally entrenched in recent artistic developments. Resultantly, those non-specifically architectural elements of the show, along with its relation to recent art history, have been given short scholarly shrift. (For but one of the more glaring recent examples of this, see: Laurent Stalder's article on New Brutalism in which the photographic panels in *Parallel of Life and Art* are improbably mistaken for paintings: Stalder, 2008, p. 267.) This is not to discount architecture oriented readings of the show out of hand, but rather to signpost my own recontextualisation of the show within art historical discourse as a form of balance, while acknowledging that a comprehensive critical review of the lengthy architectural literature on the show is beyond the scope of this article. For the most compelling discussion of the show in relation to architectural history, see: MacArthur, 2000, pp. 259–266; and MacArthur, 2007. A detailed analysis of Banham's influence over the subsequent reception of 'Parallel of Life and Art' is provided in my forthcoming Ph.D dissertation: 'Eduardo Paolozzi: History is Bunk!'

8. Buchloh, 1999, pp. 48–81; Phillips, 1982; Pohlmann, 1999, pp. 52–64; and Golan, 2009, pp. 123–179.

9. Walsh, 2001, p. 99. See also the discussion in: Barry, 1988, pp. 41–6; and the brief mention of this connection in Highmore, 2007, p. 9.

contrived to implicate them in the unfolding narrative. In 'Road to Victory' for example, visitors were taken on a triumphal journey through American history from colonisation to intervention, as revealed by photographs taken from dramatic angles and perspectives that had been carefully cropped and juxtaposed to manufacture a didactic, unambiguous meaning. The effect of these wartime exhibitions was, effectively, to telescope an idealised American past into a global democratic future.

These exhibitions were well known in London in the early-1950s.¹⁰ Alexander Dorner's 1949 monograph on Bayer, *The Way Beyond Art*, was much discussed among the ICA milieu, and versions of many of these shows had travelled to London during the war, including a scaled-down and expediently retitled version of 'Road to Victory', staged by the Ministry of Information in 1943 as 'America Marches with the United Nations'. Steichen continued to produce these types of shows well into the 1950s, culminating with the famous exhibition 'Family of Man', which toured to thirty-eight countries between 1955 and the early-1960s. Of greatest relevance to the present context, however, was the exhibition 'Memorable Photos from Life Magazine', staged at MoMA in 1951 before travelling to the ICA in London the following year, where it opened shortly before 'Parallel of Life and Art' was first formally proposed.¹¹

'Memorable Photos from Life Magazine' was curated by Steichen in collaboration with the design department of *Life* magazine, and used Bayer's design innovations to manifest the editorial structure of the magazine at architectural scale. The exhibition consisted of 187 black and white photographs, enlarged and mounted on large panels suspended from the walls of the ICA. The photographs traversed a wide range of subject matter, including portraiture, engineering, war photography and exotic images of non-western cultures, shot from dramatic long- and short-range photographic perspectives. Reflecting the structure of the magazine, the exhibition was based upon two intertwined curatorial strategies: the juxtaposition of individuals within vastly different contexts who nonetheless shared similar poses and/or expressions, and the presentation of the collective human presence as highly aestheticised abstraction. The effect of this was the generation of likeness among otherwise unlike subjects and situations, as if produced by a universal and natural historical order.

Unnatural History

While the similarities between 'Parallel of Life and Art' and these types of exhibitions are relatively clear, what has thus far gone undiscussed are the important differences between them. In order to clarify these differences, however, it is useful to briefly rehearse two important and near-contemporary critiques of how history was constituted and ordered both by these exhibitions and the pictorial news magazines upon which they were based. One of the first and most trenchant critics of the popular

10. For a discussion of Dorner's reception by the group see: Baas, 1990, pp. 9–11. See also the interview with Colin St John Wilson appended as: Graham Whitham, 'Interview with Colin St John Wilson', in Whitham, 1986, p. 460. The literature on Bayer and Steichen's exhibitions is substantial. In addition to those references in Note 7 above, see: *inter alia*, the extensive but oddly depoliticising account in Staniszewski, 1998, pp. 209–224; and the excellent discussion in Ockman, 1997, pp. 82–120.

11. At MoMA the show appeared under the slightly different and more ambiguous name of 'Memorable Life Photographs'.

American news pictorial was Siegfried Kracauer. For Kracauer, the contiguous photographic presentation of such diverse subjects atomised socio-political context, while the integration of extreme spatial configurations in unusual combinations functioned to distance them from human association. The net effect of this, he argued, was an assault upon memory and its replacement with a fixed and seamless effigy of history.¹² Kracauer's account of the American news magazine broadly anticipated Roland Barthes's later critique of Steichen's curatorial practice in particular. For Barthes, Steichen's representation of human experience as universal via the formal alignment of gesture and expression obfuscated the very real difference and injustice experienced by his subjects, while the abstraction of collective human presence amounted to the defusion of human agency. At the same time, Barthes argued, the overall structure of these shows naturalised history in order to deny that nature itself is historical.¹³ Thus despite the quite different positions Kracauer and Barthes ultimately held *vis-à-vis* photography in general, they nonetheless concurred on the manner in which this particular strain of allegedly democratic visual culture increasingly overwrote subjectivity and difference within a universalising and alienating historiographical construct.¹⁴

While 'Parallel of Life and Art's' apparent similarity to these exhibitions, and in particular its proliferation of resemblances between unlike types, would undoubtedly have contributed to its reception, a closer reading of both the images and their arrangement reveals a rather different historical strategy. While the exhibition did abound with formal affinities among subject matter as unlike as birds eggs and modernist paintings, the altogether different means by which these similarities were generated created an effect not of universalisation but destabilisation.

Unlike Steichen's shows, similarity among the panels in 'Parallel of Life and Art' was produced by each photograph's own perspectival illegibility, an effect compounded by their grainy reproduction. Upon first glance it is simply unclear from what perspective or angle many of these photographs were taken, with the result that it is difficult to ascertain whether the subject is a tiny detail or expansive whole. For example, Panel 19 reads as both urban plan and electrical circuit, while Panel 119 could be either a microscopic or aerial view. Other images feature inconsistent and/or contradictory pictorial spaces, such as the tensions between depth and flatness, and foreground and background that characterise Panels 56, 7 and 33, a Japanese woodblock print, an indigenous Australian bark painting and Jean Dubuffet's 1950 painting *Corps de Dames*, respectively.

Similarly, while 'Parallel of Life and Art' engaged the viewer's total 'field of vision', the effect was not to sublimate their relation to the gallery space, thereby generating complicity with a seamless historical flow, but to confound this physical and historical experience, effectively extending the perspectival unmooring inherent to the

12. Kracauer, 1995, p. 58, 62. It is worth underscoring, because often overlooked, that in significant components of this essay Kracauer's subject is not photography or photographs in general, but the representation of photography within the format and model of the American news magazine.

13. Roland Barthes, 'The Great Family of Man', in Barthes, 1958, pp. 101–102. Susan Sontag would later make a similar point in 'Freak Show', *New York Review of Books*, see: Sontag, 1973.

14. The irony of this being, as Buchloh, Jeffrey Schnapp and others have observed, that this was largely the same subjective overwriting as that generated by fascist visual culture and exhibition design.

images out into the space of the viewer. The panels were positioned in such a way as to block clear vistas across the gallery and thus the possibility of readily apprehending the show as a unified whole, while requiring visitors to position themselves both exactly and awkwardly to glimpse particular panels. This effect was exacerbated by the strained resolution of the photographs, which appear unclear upon closer inspection and thus produce a reflexive self-distancing in an attempt, however futile, to re-establish clarity. Furthermore, while in the accompanying catalogue each of the images was listed in numerical order by category, the panels, although numbered correspondingly, were hung non-sequentially, making the task of identifying them particularly arduous if not impossible. This destabilisation of the gallery space was emphasised in Nigel Henderson's own carefully staged and lit installation shots, where the architecture is not just overwritten but appears to dissolve nearly altogether.

This sense that one had wandered into a field where the spatial co-ordinates had come unstuck was also hinted at by the inclusion of one of Henderson's own 'stressed photographs': part of a series of photographs of everyday life that had been twisted and bent during exposure to distend and rend the picture plane, as if to suggest that Cartesian perspective, the matrix via which the parallel between life and art is quite literally established, had collapsed in upon itself.

The Insanity of History

If this reading is at odds with prevailing interpretations of the show, it is a reading nonetheless intuited, if not registered explicitly, in several contemporary accounts. For example, the repetition of form and counter-balanced poses of Panel 51, a photograph of women exercising, created a visual ambivalence that prompted Reyner Banham, in his exhibition review, to remark that this particular image 'has so little, now, to do with the recording of any conceivable reality that it is hardly rendered any less, or more, probable by being turned upside down.'¹⁵ Banham's assessment was later corroborated by an unidentified German magazine (preserved in the Smithsons' personal archive), which unwittingly published a photograph of the entire exhibition upside down. Likewise, the critic David Sylvester, normally sympathetic to the work of this group, succinctly dismissed 'Parallel of Life and Art' on the basis it was organised in such an 'arbitrary, inconsistent, and perverse a fashion as only to confuse.'¹⁶ However the most elaborate and pointed commentary in this respect came from the anonymous correspondent for *The Scotsman*, who reported that 'Anybody equipped with three hands or who could write legibly while holding a pen in his teeth and waving the Union Jack could probably make some very penetrating notes on the Exhibition called "Parallel of Life and Art" ... [only those] unafraid of instant insanity might emerge mentally unscathed ... I fled.'¹⁷

While *The Scotsman*'s review was clearly tongue-in-cheek, there is, nonetheless, a truth in the claims to the insanity inducing and dissociative effects of visiting 'Parallel of Life and Art'. While for Kracauer, who was writing in 1927, these camera perspectives were far removed from everyday human association and thus memory, the situation was quite different in post-World War II London. While few visitors to the ICA would have had first-hand access to the various scientific perspectives on

15. Banham, 1953.

16. Sylvester, 1953, p. 512.

17. *The Scotsman*, 1953.

display (although in this context it is worth recalling the scientific, especially atomic, iconography that abounded in the Festival of Britain), the telescopic and birds eye views would have been familiar to many who had served during World War II or more recently in Korea. These perspectives were certainly familiar to Henderson, who described his experience flying bombers at night over occupied Norway in terms strikingly similar to the confounding perspectival conditions of the show itself. For example, in a 1950 diary entry he wrote:

People who have not been “UP THERE” have missed an important revelation. There is the world, a terrain pinned down as flat as a tiger’s skin. The air-view visually, as psychology, mentally has killed perspective. Perspective is the art of both feet on the ground and the eye 57f in the air.¹⁸

For Henderson, this experience of perspectival rupturing was at once aesthetic and traumatic. Initially these air views prompted him to learn photography so as to take pictures from his cockpit window, however they also triggered the onset of severe psycho-neurosis for which he was soon permanently discharged from the RAF. Several weeks after discharge, Henderson suffered what he described as a total nervous breakdown (presumably post-traumatic stress disorder), from which he would never fully recover. His experience in this respect was hardly unique, and indeed, this manifestation of subjective dissociation would emerge, in various ways, in the work of numerous Western European artists and writers of the 1950s, from the technologically derived crisis of bodily consciousness diagnosed by Roland Barthes to the fiction of Swiss author Max Frisch, through, as I argue elsewhere, to the lost-wax bronzes Paolozzi would begin producing in 1956.¹⁹ Indeed, in a 1959 interview on BBC radio, the psychoanalyst Carl Jung would assert that neurotic disassociation of the type Henderson experienced both psychologically and visually, and which *The Scotsman*’s reviewer described so acutely, had come to define both Cold War historical experience and its geo-political structure.²⁰

Yet if, both by way of conclusion and to return to the issues raised in my introduction, the show registered the very socio-historical trauma and dissociation papered over by the seamless universalising history of Steichen and others’ exhibitions (as well as the mass media of the period more generally), it was nonetheless presented in such a way as to hold out on possible alternatives, if not point them up precisely. By creating an environment in which the order of things had been cast to the wind, and in which visitors were actively engaged in its reconstitution, a process during which connections were made and unmade as one progressed awkwardly through the ruptured gallery space, and subject to perpetual interruption and frustration, this architectural montage restored a sense of provisionality to history elsewhere foreclosed upon. In this respect *Parallel of Life and Art* opened a necessarily traumatic but ultimately, if only briefly, productive inter-space within the increasingly totalised historical apparatus of Cold War visual culture. And it is in this respect, in

¹⁸ TGA: Nigel Henderson, MS, ‘Notes regarding aerial photography, plant and animal forms by Nigel Henderson’, Tate Gallery Archive (Hyman Kreitman Research Centre): Personal Papers of Nigel Graeme Henderson (1917–1985), 9211.4.7, undated, c.1950.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Jet-Man’, in Barthes, (1957) 2000, pp. 71–73; and Frisch, 1959.

²⁰ This was later published as Carl Jung, ‘Man and His Symbols’, in Jung and von Franz, 1964, pp. 84–85.

what might be called its politics of historical experience, that the social and ethical dimensions of New Brutalism begin to emerge more clearly.

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