

ANDREW BICK

Katrina Blannin, Andrew Bick, *Conversations Around Marlow Moss*, Abstract Critical, 20 August 2014



Marlow Moss at Leeds Art Gallery, 2014

Katrina Blannin and Andrew Bick look back at *Conversations around Marlow Moss*, an exhibition they curated at &Model in Leeds earlier this summer. The & Model exhibition was timed to coincide with the exhibition *Parallel Lives: Marlow Moss & Claude Cahun*, on at Leeds Art Gallery until the 7th of September.

The artists shown in *Conversations around Marlow Moss* were: Eva Berendes, Andrew Bick, Katrina Blannin, Liadin Cooke, Cullinan Richards, Adam Gillam, Maria Lalic, Peter Lowe, David Saunders, Jean Spencer, Jeffrey Steele. Alongside these artists the 1977 print portfolio *Rational concepts*, 7 English artists was shown, which comprises: Norman Dilworth, Anthony Hill, Malcolm Hughes, Peter Lowe, Kenneth Martin, Jeffrey Steele, Gillian Wise.

Katrina Blannin: I came to the ‘in conversation’ talk that you organised with Jeffrey Steele at the Hales Gallery in 2009, not only because I thought I might re-acquaint with my old tutor, but because I had a feeling that you would

be talking about some of the issues that I was facing in my own practice. I still think that the idea of a ‘rational aesthetic’ is a tricky one, though very much alive... Since then, we have all three of us been in dialogue. You and I have curated shows and organised talks, visited studios and transcribed interviews – and there have been some long telephone conversations including many of the associated artists from the Construction and Systems groups. It’s a cross-generational approach that not only challenges individual practice – bringing the dialogue into the studio and taking the practice out into dialogue – but also contributes to self-generated didactic and cross fertilizing research programmes, which artists are often very good at sustaining, despite the commercial gallery system’s taste for individualism and lone pioneers. To take it a step further Catherine Ferguson in her essay *Painting and the Metaphor of Discourse* suggests that ‘the concept of the ‘radically new’ opens up the possibility of thinking about a relation that painting has with its past that is more creative than one based upon comparison (with the old).’ (my underlining). Putting it simply she talks about

contemporary painting itself being the important site for critical discourse and its development – rather than carried out by ‘a community of experts’ on a separate stage. Would you say that all the artists in our show have some sort of direct relationship with Modernism – whether exploratory or idiosyncratic?

Andrew Bick: Arguably we are still in muddled dialogue with the things Modernism represents and in the UK this means that the stalled and chequered nature of that conversation has an important effect on what contemporary art means and how it operates. You are right about the market’s desire for individualism and ‘originality’, but there is also a clear sense that British modernists, who are by definition second and third generation, if not further down the line, have often shot themselves in the foot by not entering in to dialogue with those who do not subscribe to their position and aesthetic. To be clear, second and third (or fourth and fifth) generation need not be a problem or a pejorative epithet, the question is what one does with this position now? I also think there is some confusion about irony, it is more useful as a tool for dealing with difficult and ambiguous things than the way in which it is frequently seen as a means of sneering at ‘sincerity’.

KB: I remember talking to you about the Leeds show and how it could be thought of as a ‘join the dots’ diagram of new connections, or perhaps a sort of flow chart of ideas like Alfred Barr’s Abstract Art and Cubism lithograph, but one that should be forever changing and being added to. I’ve got a huge book called A History of Modern Art which was published in the early 80s and it has only got one woman in it – luckily artists and scholars are re-writing history: discovering overlooked artists, looking sideways and backwards – creating new diagrams. Putting Marlow Moss into our impermanent metaphorical diagram was very exciting and we are indebted to the Leeds Art Gallery and their curator Sarah Brown for perhaps the best display of her work to date, and especially Marlow Moss expert Lucy Howarth and her PhD research, for putting Moss firmly back on the map. Moss’ unusual persona as a lesbian cross dresser or drag king was key to the way she lived as an artist but maybe that is what got in the way of possible dialogue with the movers and shakers of the British art establishment at the time, particularly the new abstract artists. It seems possible and necessary to redress this now.

AB: Yes, the aim of Conversations around Marlow Moss, was to put her work and forgotten personality back in dialogue with what came after and what happens now, as well as to ask questions about what makes practice

contemporary. Considering Moss’ artistic relationship with Mondrian is a way of appreciating her impact, but in parallel with this the &Model exhibition is considering the other conversations, hypothetical and actual, with British Construction and Systems artists such as Norman Dilworth Anthony Hill, Peter Lowe, David Saunders, Jean Spencer, Jeffrey Steele and Gillian Wise. In the exhibition, this forms part of a bigger and very necessary exchange artists are making now with modernist positions that are far from redundant. Moss, as an overlooked protagonist for conversations that never happened in her lifetime, is the pre-eminently unassimilated presence in this exchange and the symbolic figure of resistance to an over-homogenised history of British art. As with previous projects we have worked on, ideas of the irrational within the rational and contradiction as a vital driving force within art practice since modernism, are celebrated as a reason why we should enjoy and understand the work of Moss and her successors now.

KB: I think a lot of visitors to the Moss exhibition, held at Tate St Ives, Jerwood Hastings and then Leeds (and travelling to Tate Britain in late September), were shocked by revelations that Marlow Moss was often completely ignored by her contemporaries in Britain, even though she tried to contact them when she was living in Cornwall. Let’s face it, a lot of us didn’t know who she was.

AB: Revisiting Marlow Moss’ unanswered letters to Ben Nicholson and her dismissal of Nicholson’s hegemonic position as the face of abstraction in the UK in a letter to Paule Vézelay is a way to consider again the ideas of argument between artistic positions and generations. I think that Marlow Moss, as a person and an artist, offers continued vitality after Modernism and this is to do with the ways that she represents the contradictory nature at the roots of the modernist project. She was never articulate or polemical in the way that Theo Van Doesburg was, so brilliantly; equally she did not proselytize in the manner of her friend Piet Mondrian. Yet her relative silence, linguistically speaking, I see as a rebuke to the watered down Modernism of post-war St Ives Art.

KB: I know that Moss’ work is compared to Mondrian, who was an important mentor, but I was surprised to find it both mature and original. Comparing reproductions of both artists is almost pointless: having seen both the Moss show and the Mondrians at Tate Liverpool this year I can see that not only the construction but also the resulting facture is quite different.

AB: What Moss represents is the development of an analytical, planned, measured practice that differs

significantly from the improvised and hesitant surfaces of her great inspiration, Piet Mondrian. Mondrian is perhaps a painter's painter, with a practice that remains within painting long after he established himself at the centre of an approach that applied equally to all the plastic arts. However, processes of adjustment and erasure within his painted surfaces remained essential to how the work looked in its final state. There is also something, made really clear in the current exhibition at Turner Contemporary in Margate, evolutionary about Mondrian's development. Moss' pre-WW2 work is almost all destroyed and she also started quite late, as a fully abstract artist. In her painting, surfaces are much thinner and flatter, than Mondrian's, pre-planned through various stages. As well as this, her paintings are sitting in parallel with a sculptural/constructed practice that takes an equally measured and dispassionate approach to surface and can be fabricated for her by someone else without losing its essential qualities. I would argue that this makes her work point towards the developments of post-war concrete art in a way that Mondrian, complete though his practice is, does not.

Wise, remain partial, in both senses of the world. The incomplete aspects make me look forward to generating new versions and new conversations.

KB: It was an interesting experiment to put our show over the road from the Moss show (at the Leeds Art Gallery). &Model were great hosts and collaborators who got right behind the project. The gallery itself, with its labyrinth of rooms, some with peeling wallpaper and whitewashed Artex walls, added another very welcome visual dimension to the design of the show. You had to be there to get the full effect. I think the other artists involved enjoyed the experience and we got some great feedback from visitors; the talks were lively. It is hard to put one's finger on why the whole project worked... maybe that's it – it was a 'project' rather than just another exhibition – you took something away with you... new questions – the transformation of reflection and education into future discourse.

AB: I agree, the conversation extended to the architecture of the building, and it was when I went round early one morning with Paul Hedge from Hales Gallery that he spotted original William Morris wallpaper surrounding one of my paintings hung in the stairwell – it added to the surprise of how this worked in the space. Asking Cullinan Richards to reconstruct their Savage School Window Gallery in the shop window, with "Marlow Moss" as the text was a literal way of putting her name on the street near Leeds Art Gallery as well as including her in our exhibition. Of course it was also an incomplete project and many of the dialogues, between the work of Jean Spencer and Maria Lalic for example, or your work and that of Jeffrey Steele, or my own "quotations" of Gillian