On Mobile Compositions: A Diary, April – July 2017

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Alvar Aalto, in Arkkitechti magazine 1-2/1958: “Of course I have written poems. A few, but naturally, good ones. But they were written in the sand. And poems written in the sand are not suitable for publishers and journals. Their publisher is the wind, a splendid publisher.”[1]

Ever since we’ve been talking this image has come to me. It appears often and involuntarily, and it is crisp and felt like a memory. In it I am holding an object, a prism or box of obsidian blackness roughly the size of a human head. I turn this black shape over in my hands. Although it is deep and dark it has a translucency like glass, and I imagine I can see within it, but when I hold each facet to my eyes there is nothing but dark cloud.

There are eighteen paintings, or at least eighteen that can be identified from the photographs. That’s all there is left now.

Caitlin says, although I paraphrase, “there’s one painting where all I could see in the photographs was the bottom corner – a black shape that might not be a black shape. I’ve spent the longest time looking at it that I know it intimately and that’s been enough – through auction catalogues and the library and correspondence – to locate the work, its media and exact dimensions, the whole composition. Everything from that one shape.”

I am moving out of our apartment on the bottom of the world. We have negotiated the art collection, mostly things acquired together when we ran the gallery, the little one just outside the city centre. Closed now. I have become ruthless with pens and hairpins. I don’t know what to do with the plants. He doesn’t know where he is going either. The apartment is indifferent. It has been grazed by a tide of tenants since the Second World War, and will keep no record of our disintegration. All that we will leave behind is our dust.

On the 5th of June 1994 at the Freud Museum in London, Jacques Derrida paused amid the opening paragraphs of a paper to use his surroundings to illustrate a point. The paper he was presenting was an English version of *Mal d’ archive: Une impression freudienne,* titled in translation as *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. The origin of the word archive, the Greek *arkheion,* refers to a house, specifically the residences of the superior magistrates – the *archons*, those who command. It is these origins, Derrida said, that tie the archive – particularly those of government records – not

just to power but to place: “even in their guardianship or their hermeneutic tradition, the archives could neither do without substrate nor without residence...”[2] No matter how much an archive might suggest a certain intangibility or evasiveness, there is always the fact of its presence in space. Even digital archives are *somewhere.* Derrida described the archive as “taking place” under “house arrest”, embodying a curious passage between public and private. As an aside he says, “It is what is happening, right here, when a house, the Freud’s last house, becomes a museum: the passage of one institution to another”[3] and inserts into the text the substance of his present.

As architecture the archive produces a clear demarcation between what is inside of it, and what is out. What exactly happens within it is less clearly defined. The power of the archive is in its functions of unification, identification, classification. Derrida also notes a more ambiguous function: *consignation.* This does not just refer to ‘consignment’, to take delivery, but also ‘a gathering together of signs’, towards *consignatio:* written proof.

But what kind of proof can come from what is, at best, a house of fragments?

This city at the bottom of the world could never have been represented by the dynamic cog-geometry of the modernist machine. There are steel and glass buildings as a population of two million or so seems to demand, sure, but walking now down the too-wide main street I can still see the dirt road that used to run here, the horses and carts and wide verandas, the trenches dug to drain the wetlands, the open sewers. This outpost of the British Empire is both sixty thousand and less than two hundred years old, and as though doomed to endlessly re-enact the precarity and violence of its colonial beginnings, it demolishes part of itself with every cycle of economic boom and bust and rebuilds anew. The overwhelming impression of Perth, perched on the lower edge of 2.5 million square kilometres of Western Australia and so much more again of ocean, is of a mirage threatening to disappear at any moment.

In a paroxysm of anxiety following another round of demo-development, the Heritage Council of Western Australia added to the preservation lists whatever it could that resembled the ‘old’ city. This included our apartment complex, an unremarkable block of four with the appearance of a red-brick colonial homestead gone malignant, ‘modernised’ with art-deco porticos that crumble with concrete cancer in the afternoon sea breeze. Developers buy these pseudo-historic properties and then let them rot, until mysterious fires raze the lots slate-clean. This state of deliberate disrepair is what has kept them affordable as rentals, where most others have echoed the soaring price for iron ore.

Maison Louis Carré has begun to function for me amidst the debris of my life like an escapist meditation. I find myself leafing idly through the book,[4] set aside from packing. I picture myself rubbing my skin up against slate pulled from the same quarry as Chartres Cathedral, shaking hands with its leather-bound doorhandles, skin on skin, lying on the cool tiled floor of the entrance hall gazing up at the vaulted roof of red Finnish pine, peaceful beside the copper breast of the fireplace on the same Moroccan cushion that once supported a Finnish President. My bubble is often burst by the pages on the servants’ bedrooms, which in their practical, scaled-down interpretation of minimal-luxe most closely resemble the one-bed and studio apartments I am viewing, mostly in mid-century tower blocks.

The majority of these towers were designed by a single architecture firm run by Harold Krantz and Robert Schläfrig, a Jewish-Viennese immigrant who, having

already fled persecution, anglicized his name on arrival in Australia to Robert Sheldon. The towers' aspects maximize views of the hills and skyline, acknowledging the searing afternoon summer sun. In original condition they have in-built cabinetry and parquetry flooring in pine and marine-grade plywood, an affordable approximation of the elegance and simplicity of modernist 'truth-to-materials'. Few remain in this condition, updated with tile or cheap carpet, IKEA kitchens. Discussions about them tend to reveal something of the place in which they were built: "Migrants, new arrivals from Europe, brought with them an acceptance of living patterns that were alien to Anglo culture: density of occupation, living in the public eye, cafes, restaurants... The (Krantz and Sheldon) apartments were... practical staging posts for these migrants before they acquired the capital and contacts to find their way into local society." Then, a redemptive turn: "Beyond style, these buildings embodied the ethos of modernism - the notion that the most humble housing should be designed with the same care as the most sumptuous."[5]

The Art Gallery of Western Australia's collection displays, static for a near-decade, are being reconfigured in the hope of attracting new visitors but until recently there was an Aalto *Savoy* vase on semi-permanent display in rooms designated for 'Modernism: 1920–1960'. The champagne-treacle-coloured vase, a gift to the gallery from a company that manufactures plastics for mass consumption, shared a cabinet with glassware from Italy, France and the former Czech Republic. The classification being, broadly, 'European'.

Lecturing at Yale University on May 9th, 1939, Aalto spoke of the Villa Mairea in Noormarkku, Finland as a laboratory for testing the relationships between art and everyday life. Aalto had seen other houses made for rich collectors that contained galleries, but these were like 'Siamese Twins': "...there was no relationship between art and everyday life, although the gallery was frequently used for scotch and soda... It was difficult to find the human heart which binds the person to the art."[6]

He suggested that the question of how to live successfully with art could be answered by considering a studio apartment rather than these luxury buildings: in one room a whole house and in one house the way of the world.

Imagine this single room and find the cultural objects within it. Perhaps there will be a book case and from this book case some books in use, placed perhaps on a table open to pages of photographs. Here, the books stand in for the art, and what they suggest is the satisfaction of rotation. We prefer to re-arrange culture to suit our desires. Perhaps, given the option of versatility, we might even offer our guests the gift of a space arranged to suit their own tastes.

Based on this imagined studio apartment Aalto made for the Villa Mairea a series of white moveable walls sliding on fabric bases that can divide a large, open space in multiple configurations. These walls were secret boxes hiding inside them the artworks that did not hang on them, enabling them to be endlessly reconfigured.

The hanging system for artworks at the Maison Louis Carré appears to be something of an afterthought, not yet installed when the Carrés moved in in 1959 – odd for a house intended to be built around art. Absent too is much use of Villa Mairea's

storage-display system. The box-walls are present only in the partitions that divide the public and private spaces, unfixed but hardly changeable. But Villa Mairea was made for artists, and Maison Louis Carré is a house made for a collector-dealer and family. The laboratory, therefore, is bound to produce different results. Certain paintings appear consistently in photographic documentation of Maison Louis Carré, rotated to different walls, but the house appears to function more as a transit zone for people and art to move through. Note the lithograph table for the use of clients viewing works on paper, the guestbook full of famous names, the kitchen more functional for large parties than for family dinner. The house appears as a practical demonstration of what it might be to live, with means, according to values set by taste. It is the ultimate acquisition, everything custom made, not a house *for* a collection but part of one. Not made to live with art, but inside of it.

In referring directly to the Freud Museum, Derrida creates something of a conundrum that his following theses don't quite address. He describes aspects of the archive, its 'substrates' – those mechanisms physical or otherwise that record and hold its contents in place, its guardians and its residence – as interrelated but distinct components. His discussions draw from Freud's papers and journals and his collection of objects – from the archive *housed within*. At the Freud Museum and also at Maison Louis Carré, archive and its residence exist as a singularity. The archive is not 'housed', it *is* a house. For these house-archives, the *consignato* – the "single corpus, a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration"[7] – can be found not just in the matter they house but in their use: the living done within them. Re-purposing them as museums is therefore doomed to enact, through preservation, a simultaneous erasure of their true use-value, a partitioning that creates the inaccessible 'secret' that is for Derrida "the very ash of the archive".

My notebook is a jigsaw of stops and starts:

Akira Muto, in the translated introduction to a Japanese publication on Maison Louis Carré from 1971, writes that Aalto's 'form without form' can be difficult to understand: "it is characteristic of the information society that things are connected in haste on shortened circuits. They don't seem to notice that 'Aalto is difficult to understand' has been short circuited to 'Aalto is not worth understanding'."[8] Is this so, was Aalto ever in danger of being forgotten? Muto is writing in retrospect, viewing slides taken of the building ten years prior. He remembers an 'eerie feeling', the qualities that had seemed at home in Finland appearing "naked in the strong light and great expanse" of France. However, with 20 years and a continent's distance from Muto, Goran Schildt writes that Aalto's sense of "Scandinavian democracy and Protestant individualism... is expressed in an artistic language as simple and easy to grasp as a painting by Fernand Léger".[9] In other words, there is a Europe of universal comprehension and value.

I have noted that what Léger seeks is dissonance, the frisson of juxtaposing the disconnected[10]: the Mona Lisa, a set of keys. In contrast, Alexander Calder seeks disparity, finding harmony in the disconnected: a fish, an aeroplane. [11] I have a quote from Léger noting the disparity between Calder and his delicate work: "he is something like a walking tree trunk; displacing a lot of air as he moves, and blocking the wind".[12] Oh the certainty and solidity of these well-documented men! For Linda Nochlin, the fragmentation of modernist painting is predicated on representations of the literally fragmented body, which she takes as the true symbol of modernity. The Cubist body is born of the French guillotine.[13] Scribbled notations, too, mine: "Must the reduction to parts always be violent?" and "Is love

better expressed in attempting to put the parts back together or acknowledging the impossibility of the coherent whole?"

Unrelated, a friend lends me a copy of *The Argonauts* and I find myself deliriously adding Maggie Nelson writing on Freud: "Such freely confessed swerves into the provisional are the pleasure of reading Freud; the problems come when he succumbs – or we succumb – to the temptation to mastery rather than reminding ourselves that we are deep at play in the makeshift."[14]

I have reached some state of frenzy. All things are becoming signs.

I've spent the morning looking at photographs in the book again. This time I'm looking for Olga Carré, her smile and patterned dresses so summery in a way that seems incongruous with the Nordic coolness of the house. Olga in the pair of porcelain dogs beneath the *Golden Bell* lamp in her bedroom. Olga amongst the fabric swatches in a single cloudburst of white daisies and blue. Olga in the necklace Aalto made for her, an honour he reserved only for family and Elissa Aalto. Olga, the 'perfect hostess', the 'vivacious wife'. Olga, maintaining the house long after her husband's death, living there longer in the end than Louis in his own lifetime. Respecting, as it's phrased, "her husband's customs."[15]

Back in the library I chance on a photobook by Robert Burley documenting the decommissioning of infrastructure for analogue photography. The 35mm film production floor of a Kodak factory in Kansas that once operated in total darkness is pictured with its black-box core splayed open for the camera. A note in the margins: Kodak preferred employees on the film floor who had lost or were born without sight, finding them more naturally comfortable and capable in a world without light.[16] All of the factories are gone now, risking a future without film.

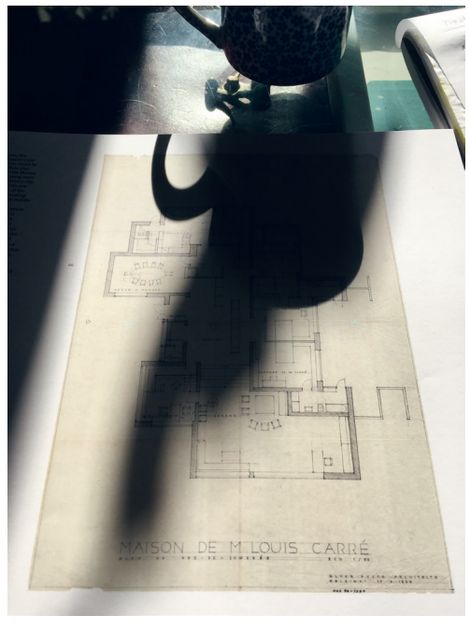
At work I receive a family anxious about the estate of an artist-Aunt. The Aunt-artist is Margery Edwards, who left Australia in the 1970s to chase Abstract Expressionism's ghost in New York. Edwards' work, although held in a few Australian museums, seems to have mostly slipped through the cracks of history – too early a champion of abstraction in her home country to be properly recognised, just too late to ride its international wave. And perhaps it doesn't help to be a woman, too. We leaf through her typewritten studio notes. She says of the colour black: "Black absorbs light (this is not absence of light – Ad Reinhardt) and energy and strength. Black surfaces contain light rather than reject it... e.g. such religious mystics as St. John of The Cross refer to their journey in the quest for God as "The Dark Night of The Soul".

Margery Edwards on the nature of art: "...my aim as an artist is to make people alive to the mystery of being".

It is autumn here and spring there, her light is 10am grey and mine is 5pm golden. Caitlin runs the phone camera along a prone surface of patchwork leather, takes off on its runway to hover before another hung on the studio wall. I am looking at a Bonnard, she tells me. A not-Bonnard. For me it is a not-not-Bonnard, a liquid crystal dance, but the abstraction of the screen aside, I think I finally understand.

I'd been picturing black holes that suck things in. What I'm looking at instead is a blackness made of over-abundance, a blackness of obstruction in the way of a shadow but with a body of its own. A body-double. I think of the strange 'floral' protrusion of the altered *Golden Bell* lamps in the Maison Louis Carré dining room, illuminating a white nothing. What I am looking at is not the portal through which time and space and objects would disappear. I am looking at something that could pull those lost things back through that long, dark, corridor, into now.

Something between an anchor and a plug. Or a singularity.



Carolyn Steedman describes 'archive fever' as a product of the archive's inherent incompleteness, a problem of scope and access ("you will not finish, there will be something missed..."), and of the lacunae in its contents. But in the archive an absence is never nothing. An emptiness "always indicates how it was once filled and animated."[17]

As an analogy, Derrida gives us Freud's analysis of Jensen's *Gravida*. Norbert Hanold the archaeologist is fixated on Gravida, who is speaking to him in ambiguous riddles from beyond the grave (or from non-existence, for Gravida is in fact a sculptural relief Hanold himself has brought to life). Hanold searches for the ashen shape of her footprint at Pompeii, for where the "trace no longer distinguishes itself from its substrate" and the moment in which live event and dead archive coincide. Through this moment he might relive her being.

Derrida ends the discussion by wondering what secrets and omissions Freud has made in his own archives. Yet his interpretation of Hanold's desire keeps a secret of its own. He mentions Hanold's 'delusion' but he does not address its source. Both the figure of Gravida and Hanold's 'archaeological turn' are revealed to be the sublimation of his feelings for a real (fictional) girl: Zoë, a childhood friend for whom he cannot acknowledge his love.

I wonder, how would our world be different if we understood 'archive fever' as a fever of devotion, rather than of lack?

Maggie Nelson again, her last lines: "But is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don't know. I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song."[18]

A memory: home for the holidays, Caitlin had brought an indigo blue *Savoy* vase as a gift for Philippa O'Brien, an artist and historian who lives in the hills outside of Perth. I was deep in some abstract new-years depression; Caitlin suggested that I take the day off work and visit.

The weather was heavy and tropical, the sky grey but still too bright, rain never far away, never close enough. Up the hill the rocky scarp glowed bauxite orange under sparse, dusty foliage settler-colonial painters have long wished to wash with a picturesque palette. We spend the morning leafing through Philippa's binders full of copies of old etchings traced from French and Dutch museums. There is an image of The Dutch East India Trading Company's *Kasteel Batavia,* the decorative stone portal of which sunk in 1629 with the ship Batavia off Western Australia's Abrolhos Islands, a site at which they are still finding skeletons of mutiny and murder in sandy mass graves. Another shows a landscape of kangaroos and wattle and eucalyptus transplanted to an aristocratic garden outside of Paris. She tells us that despite convenient stories concocted about the unsophisticated isolation of Australia's first inhabitants, there are others suggesting that when the British landed at Albany they were greeted not in Noongar, one of the continents' 500 indigenous languages, but in the language of the other white-faced visitors with whom they'd begun trading: *Bonjour.* We look at one of her paintings from the mid-1970s, a bush landscape in bright brushy shapes seen through a window framed by the floral abstractions of Marimekko curtains. Philippa had bought the fabric from a custom-built showroom run by the designer David Foulkes-Taylor, who made Bauhaus-y furniture from blood-coloured Jarrah wood, who was killed, too early, when his car hit a kangaroo on a country road in 1966. The showroom building itself still stands, recently heritage listed, on a street called Broadway.

We stay for lunch. Philippa's daughter Sophie places the *Savoy* vase at the table's centre. It overflows with bouquets of fuchsia Bougainvillea.

Driving back down the hill, I remember feeling full of history, but somehow lighter, too.

In a new room I dream I am swimming as though in a black pool. Above me the night sky seems too close, and when I reach out my hands I find that what I thought was the distant firmament glittering with stars is a heavy piecework blanket stretched just above my head, needlepoint light filtering through stretched seams. With concentration, I find a weak point and make a space to pull myself through. Up I climb, and out.

I am awake in darkness again, alone but for the crowding shapes of waiting boxes.

1 Quoted in Alvar Aalto, Viiva: Originaalipiirustuksia Alvar Aallon arkistosta = Linjen : Orginalritningar ur Alvar Aaltos arkiv = The Line : Original Drawings from the Alvar Aalto Archive. Helsinki: Suomen Rakennustaiteen Museo, 1993. Gift to the University of Western Australia by the Finnish Ambassador, 1994.
2 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
3 ibid.
4 The book is: Esa Laaksonen and Ásdís Ólafsdóttir (eds), *Alvar Aalto: Architect, Volume 20: Maison Louis Carré 1956–63,* Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2008.
5 *Insite: Western Australian Homes + Design*, Spring 2008
6 Goran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto In His Own Words.* New York: Rizzoli, 1998.
7 ibid.
8 Akira Muto and Yukio Futagawa (eds), *La Maison Louis Carré, Bazoches-sur-Guyonne, France, 1956–59*. Tokyo: ADA EDITA, 1971.
9 ibid.
10 *Fernand Léger, 1911–1924: The Rhythm of Modern Life*. Munich: Prestel, 1994.
11 Lynne Warren, *Alexander Calder and Contemporary Art: Form, Balance, Joy*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2010.
12 ibid.
13 Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1994.
14 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015.
15 ibid.
16 Robert Burley, *The Disappearance of Darkness: Photography at the End of the Analog Era*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013.
17 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
18 ibid.