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**LIGHT STUDIES,  
DARKER PROPERTIES:  
IMAGE, ARCHITECTURE,  
AND LANGUAGE  
IN THE WORK OF  
CHARLOTTE MOTH**

It is a particularity of photography that it is always haunted by the thinking, seeing mind and its spectral body, which stands always just behind the image you are looking at, facing you. In photographs of figureless landscapes and architecture this figurative haunting becomes even more pronounced. The clear lines of the images – architectonic or pastoral, man- or nature-made – brim with forms, with feeling, with shadows, and an absence. Where are the bodies that populate these built landscapes? In this absence is meaning, is the void of meaning, is memory: you, the viewer, fill it with everything.

In 1936, Walter Benjamin, in an incomparable essay on photography and film, noted ‘the incomparable significance of Atget, who, around, 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence.’<sup>1</sup> Evidence, yes, but of what? What do Eugene Atget’s Parisian streets, their neoclassical buildings and decorative facades, swooping stairwells and arching bridges and stony quays, manicured gardens and lanes of trees, attest to? The body stands behind the camera, the architecture in front of it. In this, the camera becomes both screen and frame: veiling the viewing body behind, framing the view ahead. The camera as conduit, then, as both shield and threshold. But what are we being shielded from, what are we on the threshold of?

As W. G. Sebald – no stranger to the ambiguous photograph, its use as a kind of speculative evidence – once said, plainly, dryly: ‘Places seem to me to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them.’<sup>2</sup> The titular character in the late German writer’s great novel *Austerlitz* is an architectural historian raised by foster parents in Wales, where he landed aboard a *Kindertransport* from Prague. The cover of English-language translations of the book offer a small, white-haired boy with penetrating eyes and the costume of a cavalier. This pale changeling stands dashingly and sadly in a dark field, slightly out of focus, a horizon of opaque white sky behind. One assumes the child is Austerlitz himself, though Sebald’s usual mutability in regards to fact and fiction – and his unique use of unexplained images to punctuate his novels – assures the learned reader that the image is simply a found one that fit the narrative. Ever surprising, then, to learn that the image is of one of Sebald’s friends, an actual architectural historian.

As the fictional Austerlitz sets out in search of his stolen, obliterated past, he takes photographs and assembles an archive of images along the way. When he has a breakdown, these images help him recover both mentally and his memory. The blur of the real and the contrived, everywhere in Sebald’s work, makes another appearance here, as he – like his Austerlitz – was also a devoted photographer. ‘I’ve always collected stray photographs; there’s a great deal of memory in them’<sup>3</sup>, he clarified in 2001, shortly before he died. Sebald used grainy, seemingly photocopied images (so degrad-

ed and timeless they might have been taken in 1900 by Atget) as both repositories and instigators of memory and history – emotional, architectural, political – and as obscurers of it. His textual narratives are not contained in the images but arise from the reader-viewer’s response to them. Undated, uncaptioned, the images reject the very past and ‘pastness’ that they document. Instead they become fixed forever in some suspended and subjective present.

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The disarming, spectral beauty of Atget’s Parisian ‘crime scenes’ and the strange, dreamy movement of Sebald’s geographically restless, travelogue-like novels, with their paradoxical clarity and precision of prose and image (see the protagonist of Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn* who walks along Britain’s seashore; see Austerlitz and his photographs of architecture), both come to mind when first encountering Charlotte Moth’s affecting body of work. From the *Travelogue* series of photographs the English-born, Paris-based artist began making and pooling more than a decade ago, in 1999, starting with images of English seaside towns and architectural relics of repose, and then expanding into a photographic collection with an emphasis on notable European architecture (Robert Mallet-Stevens; Eileen Gray; traditional, proto-modernist houses in Ibiza), to the evocative series of sculptural objects, installations, and films she has begun more recently, the artist has consistently sought to reconcile the itinerant body with the stolidity and stasis of architecture. The roving eye and the sheltering room, which that eye then parses from all angles, all shadows, all histories.

Accordingly, Moth’s practice – her very body of work– has a subtly sculptural basis. Its photographs, films, objects, and installations act as a kind of scaffolding or performance of seeing, with all the movement (both internal and external) and stillness, the figuring of time and space, that this suggests. The buildings she photographs might be preserved and conserved or abandoned and decaying and soon to be knocked down – her photographic eye does not discriminate as it documents each architecture in all its multitude of grand details or bland beauty. Still, the questions come. Documents – but why? Evidence – but of what? A travelogue – but to what end? The sometimes brilliant banality of Moth’s ambient, black-and-white photographs and the intelligent, luminous intensity of her color images quiet such questions at first. Like a montage, her images evoke an atmosphere, a nostalgia, a terror, a romance, or nothing. Their very specifics, so plainly wrought, evoke the opposite: hazy lands of feeling that bounce off the surfaces of the images like so much light.

The work has taken her to Paris, Marseille, London, Los Angeles, Kyoto, Hamburg, Maastricht, Brussels, and elsewhere. From her teenage years in Bexhill on Sea to her current, occasional status in Paris, Moth has found herself in a kind of continual displacement, as she says, which has helped her build the *Travelogue* – and the separate works that stand alongside it – to its current estimable size. Born in 1978 in Carshalton, England, Moth went on to receive her MFA at the at Slade School of Art in London, and

then found herself on a research fellowship at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht in 2005, and, following, a series of residences that took her from Paris to Dublin to Germany to Portugal, and, next year, to Marfa, Texas.

If her early photographs of British seaside buildings were made with the idea that they might generate ideas for sculptures – conjuring, again, Atget, who first marketed his photographs as ‘documents for artists’ to paint from– quickly this benign if inquisitive research mutated into the work itself. In so doing, her traveling, a form of research, became the basis for the *Travelogue* (1999–ongoing), photographic evidence that became the very body of work it was supposed to inspire. The earliest works in this series were black-and-white images of the Deal Barracks, in Kent; the Barracks are infamous as the former site of the Royal Marines School of Music, which was bombed by the IRA in 1989, killing and wounding many of the young musicians enlisted there.

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The first building that Moth photographed, the Barracks also have an uncanny formal and conceptual relationship to a recent series of images she took of another abandoned former school, this one for the deaf in Porto, Portugal. On first glance, the long, scuffed hallways with their blue and green walls and myriad, high-ceilinged rooms studded with bright tiles featuring the alphabet at the school in Porto – where Moth has made her studio during her residency at the Serralves Foundation – would seem to have nothing to do with the horror inflicted at Kent, but the Portuguese institution has its own ghosts. It was one of the last schools to embrace the now discounted pedagogical practice of not teaching deaf children sign language but instead forcing them to speak. Thus Moth’s images of a long curtain (a favorite motif of the artist’s, perhaps for its theatrically veiling and spatially divisive capabilities) sweeping across a stage in a modern-looking theater – where the deaf children perhaps performed and were prodded to talk – takes on darker properties.

As with her images from Kent, which are shown in the book you are reading now for the first time, many of Moth’s *Travelogue* photographs stay unexhibited for considerable periods, remaining a private trove of research or evidence, as it were. See, for example, her images of Rue Mallet-Stevens in the 16th arrondissement in Paris, taken just after she saw the 2005 survey of the French architect and designer Robert Mallet-Stevens’s work at the Centre Pompidou. The entire street was built in the 1920s by the architect after whom it was named, featuring six modernist villas of Mallet-Stevens’s own design, each an elegant configuration of handsome geometric planes and bulbous, pregnant volumes. Famously, Rue Mallet-Stevens would go on to have a twinned existence, as both an actual residential street and the stage set and backdrop for numerous films made in the 1920s and 30s, which fit the cinematic aspirations of Mallet-Stevens himself.

The villa-filled street also inspired Moth to make her own first foray into the filmic. Entitled *The Abstract Forms* (2010), the film is entirely composed of black-and-white still photographs made on Rue Mallet-Stevens with a cast not of people but of mirrors, prop lights, foliage, and a migrating rectangle that bounces around the street with the austere antics of a Surrealist short. The architectural images – alternately bland, funny, or beautiful – are interspersed with title cards written by the artist Francesco Pedraglio and set to a live drumming score by Sean Dower. The film’s evident inspiration is Man Ray’s experimental short *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* (1929). Man Ray’s longest film (which features its own dramatic drumming soundtrack cut with hints of lyrical Erik Satie piano solos) offers a pair of Parisian travelers – their faces surreally covered in cloth à la Rene Magritte’s paintings of lovers from the same years – on a road trip to the Villa Noailles in Hyères, another modernist villa designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens, this one in the hills overlooking the sea in the south of France.

In the way of an itinerant traveler, finding connections and booking trains, Moth was inspired by *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* to head south. There she would visit and photograph the Villa Noailles, which Mallet-Stevens designed for the collectors Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles and their vast trove of artworks by Marcel Breuer, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Jacques Lipchitz, Man Ray himself, and others. In Man Ray’s film, he memorably shoots the Villa Noailles’s famous cubist garden, designed by Gabriel Guevrekian, which is surrounded by walls punctuated with rectangular apertures. These empty windows act as frames, turning the stunning surrounding environs of Provence into a series of landscape photographs, ones that wouldn’t be completely out of place in Moth’s own oeuvre. Thus, this past spring the artist set out to the south of France in the service of her ever-expanding *Travelogue* and its resulting projects.

In *Les Mystères du Château de Dé*, Man Ray’s camera lingers on gorgeous architectural details and dark shadows falling geometrically across the pale shoulders of the villa, as well as on the interiors, tricked out with geometric ceiling lights and strict modernist furniture. Surrealist touches – dice, clocks, wooden hands, occluded faces, a concluding sculptural tango – add a hint of hallucinatory hilarity to the contemplation of design and art. Intrigued by the way Man Ray filmed the house, activating its carefully designed spaces and objects via his artful and joyous camerawork, Moth brought a 16mm camera with her to follow suit. Never having worked with film before, she was attracted to 16mm due to its actual composition as a number of stills, which provide a link to her previous films comprised solely of still images. Focusing on the geometric forms, color patterns, and various structures and spaces within the villa and its exterior gardens, Moth began where Man Ray had left off nearly a century before.

Following her time filming and photographing the Villa Noailles, Moth made her way to nearby Marseille, where she continued filming at the Le Corbusier Unit, concentrating on less photographed interior details like the ceramic tiling and the brashly colored walls. After this, her modernist architectural pilgrimage found her on the steps of E-1027, Eileen Gray’s legendary house built on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in 1929. The house has a storied history: the obsession and nemesis of Corbusier, who once vandalized it with wall paintings while Gray was away; local owners who were murdered or ruined, leading to the house being squatted and its coveted Gray-designed furniture being entirely sold off in the late 1990s.

The house has finally been restored amid a renewed interest in Gray’s career and work, and Moth’s visit was revelatory for a number of reasons. A certain Mr. Dedieu was on hand to show her around the villa, and with him he brought the book *E1027, Maison en Bord de Mer, Eileen Gray, Jean Badovici*. Part of an architectural series published in 1929 by the French magazine *L’Architecture vivante*, the format is that of a loose-leaf portfolio of pages printed with photographs of the house’s various rooms. While showing Moth around the villa, and without explanation, Dedieu began carefully laying out these images according to the spaces that they represented in the house. In the dining room, he spread out the images of the original dining room; in the bedroom and bathroom he did the same. In this way Moth was able to see the original state of the architecture she stood in at that very minute, mediated by the medium of photography and its requisite distance.

Moth described this action to me as a kind of performance, the pages of the book slowly transforming, via accumulation and placement, into a two-dimensional installation in and of the house. In such a situation, which is the simulacra, which the shadow? Adding to this hall of mirrors, as Moth followed Mr. Dedieu like a disciple through the rooms, she began photographing the book’s loose pages as they lay like a floor plan atop the very house they depicted. One wonders how different it was to stare at the loose pages and experience the house in person. Photographs, after all, provide a comfortable distance, which the viewer can then fill with any emotion, any narrative they wish. Moth knows this.

Which brings us to the book you are reading now, also a collection of loose-leaf images that Moth has made. Interestingly, this is the first book project that Moth has pursued that has focused on her photography, despite her art practice being almost entirely image-based. A recent catalogue, published by Sternberg Press and made on the occasion of the artist’s solo exhibition at Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg, in Germany, in September 2010, was comprised almost totally of text via a series of essays she asked numerous writers, artists, curators, and historians to write in reaction to her various works. In so doing, it highlighted the latent importance of writing to her practice, in

which language is often shimmering like some palimpsest just below the surface of her imagery, like leaves submerged in some larger, darker body of water. What is that language, though? Where does it begin?

Moth does not use narrative in a discernibly textual way, despite the title cards in her film *The Absent Forms*. Those, after all, were written by someone else. Instead, she relies on more subtle narrative techniques—sequencing, accumulation, formal patterning and the repetition of motifs, propulsive sound—to move her story forward, though that story, like a travelogue, remains mostly unencumbered by plot and its traditionally narrative machinations. Here, Sebald is once again conjured, for his travelogue-like novels were rarely predicated on plot turns; one knows how World War Two and the Holocaust, often his implicit subjects, turned out. Rather, the movement forward of his books rested in the mental and emotional and geographical restlessness of his characters. His protagonists, Austerlitz among them, moved across Europe, taking photographs, thinking, despairing, seeing, remembering, reflecting. That Moth's own work should feel so literary despite its absence of language is not surprising. Her works, with their occlusion and subversion of ready meaning and explication and contextualization, depend on their viewer becoming the writer of the narrative that will hold them together. That narrative then becomes both the memories that the viewer brings with them, and the forms and ideas Moth is able to isolate within her small, shattering frames.

The artist recently made a series of *Light Studies* (2011), works that stand outside of her *Travelogue* collection. Moth had been thinking about Brancusi's studio in Paris, with its famous assemblage of pedestals and sculptures, constantly rearranged and juxtaposed, which he captured, tableaux-like, in his own evocative photographs. Inspired by the frictions and tensions and surface reflections that Brancusi was able to conjure from a select group of objects, pedestals, and sculptures, Moth began photographing, in heavy contrast black and white, her own set of diminutive, geometric objects. Her glass and silver balls, circular mirrors, wood blocks and abstract assemblages all hold a certain modernist or surrealist or architectural frisson, particularly in their causal relationships on the tabletop where they are arranged. The resulting works, studies in light and shadow and reflection as well as the strange, charged currency of objects, which might suddenly hold the power of relics, were then used for a series of slide projections. A screen suspended in the middle of a room was projected on both sides with different images; the relationship between the photographic pairs, which could only simultaneously be seen in the viewer's memory, suddenly took on a larger tenor. They evoked the tension between artist and spectator, photography and sculpture, light and shadow, memory and experience.

As I was writing this essay, Moth began a related series entitled *Colour Studies for a 16mm Film* (2011). In these images, pinkish-red and pistachio-green tabletops

are set with a vivid selection of objects: plastic, grid-like architectural models; a green-plastic mirror; a cylindrical disco reflector; a foam triangle; a fish tank with copper edging that resembles a minimalist object; rectangles of mirrored glass that are scattered across the table like islands. Space, form, colour, structure. Suddenly the referents are not surrealism but the art historical movements that came after, and the present. Four lamps on tripods outfitted with color filters, as well as sunlight pouring through the windows, light the objects. The images, taken in Moth's enormous studio in the former school for the deaf in Porto, where she is preparing a film, feature geometric forms and swaths of shadow distilled from the artist's epic architectural research the past decade. Nevertheless, they remain nimble and numinous as ever, mindful of the history and temporality to which she is so drawn, and which draws each of us, and yet bearing that weight ever so lightly.

- 1 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 226.
- 2 Maya Jaggi, 'Recovered Memories: WG Sebald', *The Guardian* (London), 22 September, 2001.
- 3 Ibid.