

For Marlow Moss

Marlow Moss is an under known figure in British Art now proven to have played a key role in the development of early Modernism in Paris. The pioneering PhD and curating of Dr Lucy Howarth initiated the reappraisal of her significance in the UK and I have been working in tandem with Lucy since we met at her Tate St Ives exhibition, *Marlow Moss: Space, Movement, Light* in 2014.¹ We both presented conference papers for Leeds Art Galley's *Parallel Lives, Marlow Moss + Claude Cahun* and subsequently made exhibitions together at Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, in 2017.² For Lucy, working with Museum Director Sabine Schaschl, the exhibition was *Marlow Moss, Forgotten Maverick*, the only comprehensive survey supported by a substantial publication on her work to date.³ Cerith Wyn Evans was installing on the ground and first floor of the museum and I prepared my exhibition in the third-floor galleries, *original/ghost/variety/shifted/double/echo*.

Subsequently, in 2018, I was shortlisted for and won a public commission to make a canopy for a refurbished arcade in Piccadilly running north-south between Jermyn Street and the main thoroughfare. Princes Arcade is situated in the heart of the menswear district of Mayfair and now populated with shoe shops, shirt shops, a hat store, fine leather goods shop, perfumery etc. Given Moss' striking propensity for elegant dressing in men's jackets and jodhpurs, I could not resist dedicating this project to her. A further layer to the commission was to collaborate with Savile Row based Drakes Menswear on a pocket square, designed as a unisex accessory for all those who might wish to fulfil the category of peacock, dandy, flaneur and/or snappy dresser, or simply carry Marlow Moss' name in their bag or pocket.

Despite being largely forgotten in the UK, Moss is arguably the most significant British pre-war constructivist of her generation. Because of this, she offers a particularly relevant paradigm for the current moment of reappraisal in contemporary art. Recognising that Moss fits a pattern of neglect that is a central element of my research, placing her alongside later figures such as Anthony Hill, Jeffrey Steele & Gillian Wise, means fixing her name in a network of visual connections that reaches as far as current art practice. Further to this, her character and personal life, despite its understated nature, represents a nexus of gender and identity that is inseparable from her commitment to concrete, constructive and geometric art forms. The importance of this lies in its challenge to general assumptions about the trajectory of art in relation to identity.



Fig. 10.1
Portrait photograph of
Marlow Moss, c.1938, by
Stephen Storm.



Fig 10.2
Installation View, *Parallel Lives: Claude Cahun and Marlow Moss*, Leeds Art Gallery, 2014.



Fig. 10.3
Portrait photograph of Marlow Moss, c.1950, by Stephen Storm

The aim of my ongoing engagement with Moss has therefore been to generate projects that in effect circle around her oeuvre as a means of raising Moss' profile as much as demonstrating how much a greater understanding of her achievements can change what we do with visual art now. The methodology is founded in the idea that raising awareness of such a significant, unconventional and original figure also provokes other changes in perception across the field, framing new contexts for practice and acting as a catalyst for further dialogue and exhibition making. I would describe this as happening through a method of conversation, driven by visual practice, specifically through fomenting dialogue between the work of Moss' and that of contemporary art and artists. It is a way of placing an overlooked artist, no longer able to speak for herself, at the centre of a multi protagonist dialogue.

The legacies of constructive and concrete art are commonly assumed to be impervious to questions of gender and identity as much as they are traditionally understood as being completely bound up in rational modernist paradigms. Inevitably, the fact that such paradigms are also seen as too closely aligned with typical male behaviour means that differencing or even challenging this particular aspect of the canon has necessarily prioritised recognisably feminine or feminist forms as a means of clearly demarcating a response to prevailing assumptions.⁴ An interesting element of the projects I have engaged with is the very different but clearly equivalent approach of my colleagues, artists Cullinan Richards, as well as co-curator of the exhibition at & Model Gallery, Leeds, *Conversations Around Marlow Moss* (2014), Katrina Blannin.⁵

Art historical research, such as that of Howarth, questions our assumptions around canonical Modernist, Concrete and Constructive art in ways that my curation argues can make place for contemporary practices to thrive under the influence of figures such as Moss. Moss presents rich possibilities as a presence through which ideas from Modernism that are maverick, contradictory, and touched by queerness can and do generate new forms of contemporary art in response. And in this process the presence of Moss the persona and artist, becomes more enduring, representing a vitality that returns to her, not as muse but as generative and enduring presence.

An interesting parallel to this would be Amelia Jones writing on the Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.⁶ Equally a forgotten figure, a maverick and disturber of male entitlement, the Baroness is interwoven into the history of New York Dada. Research argues that she had given Marcel Duchamp the idea of using a urinal as ready-

made art work.⁷ Now reappraised as a precursor of performance art, deploying her body as a divergent and disruptive signifier within the artistic and social milieu, The Baroness has left little by way of artefacts, but presents us with the most extraordinary biography. Moss can also be clearly documented as an innovator, having given Mondrian the idea of the double black line in De Stijl painting, but does not offer such an outrageous persona to write about. Nor can Moss be claimed to have prefigured feminist performance and body art, which has clearly been a significant and impactful trend. Nevertheless, Moss' apposite qualities can be defined through a negative. That is by noting her absence from the British mainstream in ways that can be seen to be about a peculiarly British animosity towards radicality within the Modernist programme, an engrained and settled conservatism that also accounts for the huge gaps in the collections of Modern Art, which directors from John Rothenstein onwards have struggled to overcome.⁸

The opening up of parallels is a key aspect of this approach to research through practice. Things, objects, exhibitions, all made in ways that can generate conversation as a form of extended discourse. This is why in my reading of Lucy Howarth's research, one of the things I have noted is the way Moss was snubbed by Ben Nicholson and later the Modernist groupings around Henry Moore and Victor Pasmore.⁹ She was too integrated with the radical central European mainstream, knew too much from being at the core of innovation and discovery in pre-war Paris, and later gave no succour to the diluted and pastoral inflections (see Lawrence Alloway, *Nine abstract artists, their work and theory*) that have always limited the St Ives Modernists.¹⁰ In these terms, the starting point for me, with Moss, is the historically remarkable lack of real dialogue in three letters she wrote to "Mr and Mrs Ben Nicholson", only the second of which received a cursory and unsatisfactory reply and which were spaced out over the course of three years.¹¹ The absence of conversation. A curatorial approach that therefore fills gaps where conversation was implicitly denied allows for the influx of everything that this denial was refusing. Arguably Nicholson and large aspects of British St Ives School Abstraction represented a sense of entitlement and insularity that clearly excluded a figure like Moss and which has uncanny contemporary echoes in British social, ethical and political behaviour.

Origins of this phase of my research lie in an interest in the post war British Constructionist and Systems artists grouped around Kenneth and Mary Martin, Anthony Hill and Gillian Wise. This process also includes working closely with fellow artists who share equivalent memories to my own of incisive teaching from tutors outside the emerging consensus of 1980s art school theory. In my own instance John Carter and later Anthony Hill, and for Katrina Blannin, Jeffrey Steele. In the last ten years or so there has existed what could also be described as a growing international mood of re-examination of the geometric and systemic principles of certain kinds of art, led by the growing awareness of significant developments in South American Modernism, which have no direct equivalence in the North American – Western European canon widely perceived as dominating the late 20th Century. At the time I was studying, through the 1980s, Carter, Hill, Steele and students such as myself were seen as working in a time lag. The consensus of the 1980s and early 1990s was that relief construction was something you did because you couldn't make up your mind whether to be a painter or a sculptor. In a unique way, the continuity of Swiss hospitality to these art forms, along with the international pioneering entrepreneurialism of Max Bill, gives the basis of a nexus that has more recently taken new forms. Here also Museum Haus Konstruktiv is playing a leading role.¹² Historically, Max Bill's 1960 Helmhaus Zurich exhibition *Konkrete Kunst 50 Jahre Entwicklung* gave an interesting and varied platform to artists including Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica and the British Constructionist Anthony Hill. Moss was not part of this exhibition but had been included in a number of key Swiss exhibitions prior to the 1939-1945 war, notably *Konstruktivisten /Constructivists*, at Kunsthalle Basel in 1937.¹³

By contrast, what could be described as a British misperception, has missed out on celebrating the depth of international influence and engagement artists such as Moss provide. Two examples will serve to demonstrate what I mean by this. The first is *Blast to Freeze, British Art in the 20th Century* (2002-2003) initiated by Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and touring to Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, but never reaching any British art museum. *Blast to Freeze*, taking Vorticism as its cue and ending with the Young British Artists of the 1990s, consciously placed British Constructionism as a movement in the foreground of post-war development.¹⁴ Examples of works by Anthony Hill, Kenneth and Mary Martin and Victor Pasmore were given proper representation alongside the usual and expected artists, from Michael Craig-Martin to Gilbert and George to Moore and Hepworth and a selection of YBAs (Young British Artists). The second exhibition, *Unbound*, was a survey exhibition at The Hayward Gallery in 1994, which has strong affinities with *As Long as It Lasts*, held at the Witte de With Center in Rotterdam (now Kunstinstituut Melly) in 1993. Here a conscious attempt to place mainstream European developments in parallel with the US innovations of figures such as Jessica Stockholder and Jonathan Lasker managed to both look undercooked compared with this Rotterdam precursor and fall foul of typically British disdain typified by the review quoted below;

On the other wall from Lasker's works hang those of Swiss-born Olivier Mosset, who practises an ironical and exhausted high modernism, painting flat and uninflected grids and cruciform shapes vaguely reminiscent of paintings by Mondrian or Malevich. Mosset's work looks much less zany than Lasker's, but again this is painting which is suspicious of itself: art which is not unbound but bound up with the history of art, and which seems both more disillusioned and worldly than its sources. Mosset says he knows a painting is finished 'when it's sold'.¹⁵



Figure 10.4
Installation view, *Construction and its Shadow*, Leeds Art Gallery 2011, with Cullinan Richards' *How far can you get in the figurative, grey, no.3*, top right corner of the image.

Apart from the embarrassing misappraisal of Olivier Mosset's significance, the implication here is that being bound up with the history of art somehow exhausts the artists' imagination and therefore practice. This quite forgets the dangers inherent in any programme that seeks to ignore history as well as carrying the usual assumptions regarding US post-war dominance in producing innovative visual art. These are the same assumptions that have been shown to be less than what they seem in the writing and research of Serge Guilbault and Frances Stonor Saunders.¹⁶

An interesting parallel to this has been my ongoing collaboration with artists Cullinan Richards. Their work was included in my research fellowship exhibition *Construction and its Shadow*, at Leeds Art Gallery in 2011.

Cullinan Richards' ongoing project *Savage School Window Gallery* invited guest artists to come up with texts for a light box art work of theirs, first shown as part of their Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre exhibition *Girl Rider* in 2008, bearing the text GO GO. Subsequently artists were

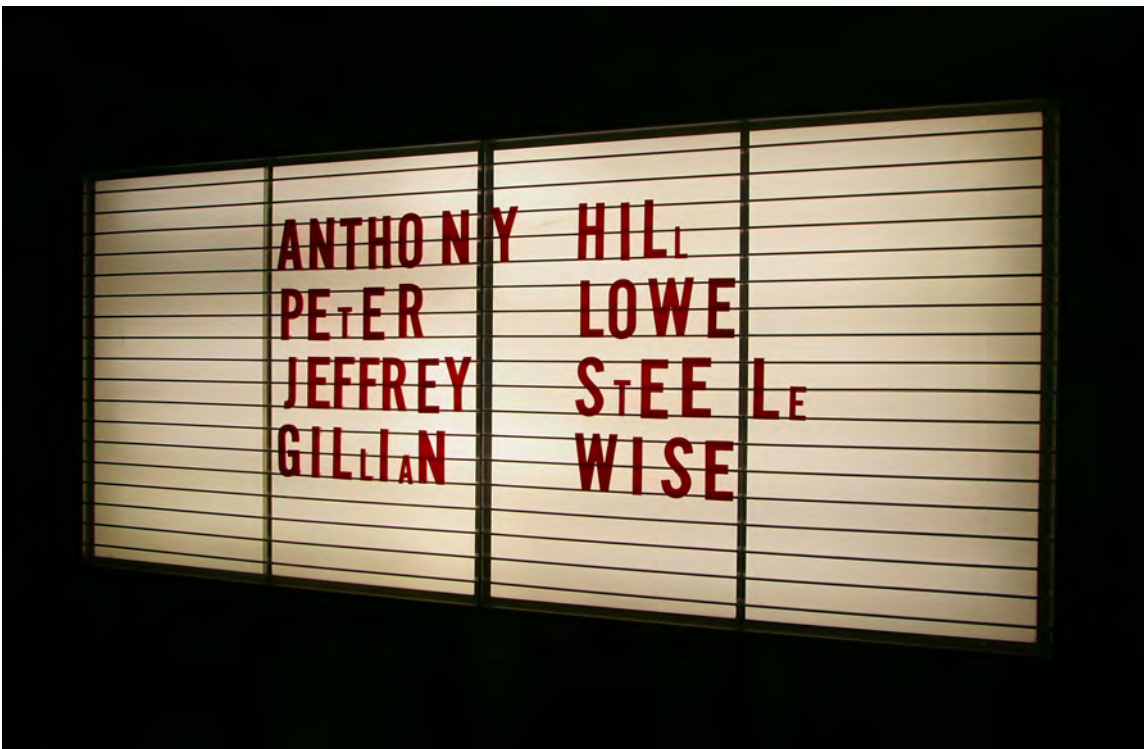


Fig 10.5
Andrew Bick, *Savage School Window Gallery*, December 2010.

commissioned to produce a text for this lightbox, positioned in the window of their Vyner Street Studio in London. These are documented in the monograph on their work *Collapse 08-2011*, including Jannette Paris, Bridget Smith, Tom Morton and Alexis Teplin among others.¹⁷ My own contribution, echoing the research I was preoccupied with at the time, was the names of four key British Constructionist and Systems Artists; Anthony Hill, Peter Lowe, Jeffrey Steele and Gillian Wise

The crucial development of Cullinan Richards' original concept for the exhibition *Conversations Around Marlow Moss*, in 2014, was to invite them to present *Savage School Window Gallery*, with the text 'Marlow Moss', in the window of &Model, as a key piece for the exhibition that I co-curated with Katrina Blannin in parallel to the Leeds Art Gallery Cahun/Moss exhibition and symposium. Lucy Howarth writes beautifully about heading for the opening at Leeds and being "...emotionally struck by the Cullinan Richards piece *Savage School Lightbox: MARLOW MOSS 2014* which unexpectedly confronted me in the window of &Model as I hurried up the street from the railway station – Moss's name quite literally 'up in lights'".¹⁸



Figure 10.6
Cullinan Richards, *Savage School Lightbox: MARLOW MOSS 2014*, &Model, Leeds, 2014.

It was a double delight to then see this reproduced as an installation shot in the Haus Konstruktiv Marlow Moss monograph as well as validation for this deliberately looping approach to research, where exchanges within exchanges, dialogues woven into dialogues, actually begin to create projects that offer new patterns of understanding and gently prize apart the conventional receptions of the historical canon and contemporary art's place in relation to it.

My thinking for the public commission in Piccadilly, from the invitation to make a proposal, through winning the commission, to the development stages and final realisation, had a clear idea of how it would act as a nexus. It was a format through which to interweave the concepts and histories that form a dynamic aspect of my practice, concepts in which I am curating as much as embodying my own role as the artist. The proposal was about taking two positions;

...to place a transient and light generated framework that is referencing the serial development of my own art in relation to uses of repeated and layered grids, the other, to combine this sympathetically, with gentle playfulness to the nature of the building and the associations of the area with menswear, sartorial elegance and cutting edge contemporary art. This proposal is about creating new ways that these worlds and traditions might be combined and interpreted.¹⁹

There was a mischievous aspect to the original idea, and that was to blast light from ground level up through the grid canopy, to create an enlarged wall shadow-drawing on the façade of the building that was deliberately in keeping with the sensitive restoration of a venerable and traditional Mayfair setting. It turned out that the only block to this was that The Crown Estates did not own the pavement immediately below the commission site. Light elements therefore had to be contained within the canopy itself. Far from being a compromise, this turned out to be the key to developing an idea of transparency, almost like the use of atmospheric perspective in painting, within the relatively shallow depth of the four-layer grid. This approach proved more receptive to the changing light conditions between night and day, combined with the attraction to look up from under the canopy, which could not have occurred if, effectively, a night-time pedestrian found themselves standing on a bank of upward projecting spotlights.²⁰ Key aspects of the proposal were therefore retained and augmented as the lengthy project development stages with architects Rolfe Judd and Structural Engineers Dendy|Byrne unfolded;

Given the sensitivity of the site and its histories the proposal focuses on subtlety and combining conventional materials in unusual ways in order to re-interpret space and how we pass through it and pay attention to it. The piece would effectively 'disappear' in muted daylight; be strongly visible as shadow in sunlight; and then provide a dynamic asymmetrical grid under carefully designed artificial lighting when seen at night... In this way it echoes fundamental principles of architecture by both animating and being animated by light, space and movement. For the individual walking through the arcade and under the canopy, slowness and an ability to sustain repeated consideration is a central idea, as it is to all of my work, shadows, reflections and echoes being operative terms in my approach to practice.²¹

The pocket square, devised in partnership with Michael Hill, creative director of Drakes Menswear, is effectively the grid layout of the canopy commission, with a decorative border taken from the colours used in the laminated glass that forms part of the canopy interlayers and back lit reveals at each end. Pocket squares come at a standard 45 x 45cm and those at Drakes are hand rolled and stitched at the edges, and screen printed, in this case on a light silk and cotton ecru fabric at a factory in Macclesfield. This square continues to take a life of its own. People wear it as a hairband or hair tie, conventionally in a breast pocket, and one colleague has it folded in a curious vintage frame, so that it echoes the transparent layering of the grids in the canopy itself. Essentially this is as mild an object as the sort of artefact found in high end museum boutiques, but in practice its relationship to detailed research and ability to take on the mantle of whoever wears it, offers a greater symbolic presence and subtler opportunity to see the apparent shallowness of attire as only the surface of something much more interesting. Moss has been undervalued and misunderstood simply because there is nothing loud about the way she dismantled British ideas of convention. Her work is therefore not yet complete as much as her value to subsequent artists can be proven to be generative.

The arc of these various interventions has therefore inserted Moss's name into the public realm twice, once for a temporary exhibition in an artist run project space in Leeds, in the form of Cullinan Richards' *Savage School Window Gallery*. The second, a permanent public commission at Princes Arcade on Piccadilly in London. A further layer, ripe for greater development, is the wearable art work, a pocket square. Developing

a process of opening the relationship between issues of gender and identity and concrete, conceptual and non-representational art forms is important because it demonstrates that unconventional models can appear to have a conventional surface and exist, disruptively, inside the world of traditions.

If Moss were a chemical element, her work could be described as having high valency and the proof of this is the growing number of adaptations and responses to her work in existence.²² In other words, it is not that she can be copied, but that artists are still continuing to find new ways to connect with her practice and that these are multiple rather than a single or possessing of only one fixed route through which to make a connection. My commission, curation and tentative foray in to the world of *menswear for everyone* is an attempt to communicate with the imagination of Marlow Moss the artist. If I could characterise the intention behind the canopy commission in Piccadilly, it would be that on the façade of a venerable building, it is like pulling open the drawer to another world. That drawer remains open. As a result, imagine Marlow Moss, the name, the person, the artist, permanently humming against the footfall, against the traffic.



Fig 10.7
Initial canopy visualisation, Luvo Architekten, Zurich



Fig 10.8
Final canopy, photograph Ben Deakin



Fig 10.9 & 10.10
Pocket square in vintage frame, private collection UK; Cullinan Richards, double studio portrait with pocket squares. Photograph: Andrew Bick, October 2020.

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- ¹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/bp-spotlight-marlow-moss/essay>, accessed 12 May 2020.
- ² <https://patternsthatconnect.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/conversations-around-marlow-moss-and-parallel-lives/>
- ³ <https://www.hatjecantz.de/marlow-moss-7065-1.html>
<https://www.hauskonstruktiv.ch/enUS/exhibitions/film-archive/movie-marlow-moss.htm>
- ⁴ See Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desires and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- ⁵ <https://patternsthatconnect.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/conversations-around-marlow-moss-and-parallel-lives/>
<https://www.andmodel.com/archive.htm>
- ⁶ Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism, A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004.
- ⁷ Irene Gammel *Baroness Elsa Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity—A Cultural Biography* The MIT Press, 2002.
- ⁸ http://www2.tate.org.uk/archive/journeys/history/html/people_dir_rothenstein.htm
- ⁹ Andrew Bick, 'Why I wish Marlow Moss had confronted Ben Nicholson; arguments across art history as a means of rearranging contemporary positions.' Paper given at the Leeds Art Gallery Symposium, Parallel Lives; Claude Cahun + Marlow Moss, 12 June 2014.
- ¹⁰ 'In St Ives they combine non-figurative theory with the practice of abstraction because the landscape is so nice nobody can quite bring themselves to leave it out of their art.' Lawrence Alloway, 'Introduction', to *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory*, London: Alec Tiranti, 1954, p12.
- ¹¹ Email correspondence with Lucy Howarth, 8 June 2020 and PhD Thesis, University of Plymouth 2008.
- ¹² *Konkrete Gegenwart*, Museum Haus Konstruktiv/Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2019.
- ¹³ Jan Tschichold, *Konstruktivisten/Constructivists : van doesburg domela eggeling gabo lissitzky moholy nagy mondrian pevsner taeber vantongerloo vondemberge u.a. - Kunsthalle Basel vom 16. Januar bis 14. Februar 1937*, Basel: Kunsthalle, 1937.
- ¹⁴ See Christopher Stephens in *Blast to Freeze*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg/Hatje Canz, 2002, pp 136-7.
- ¹⁵ Andrew Graham Dixon reviewing Unbound at The Hayward, 15 March 1994, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/art-sort-of-almost-in-a-way-nearly-is-unbound-at-the-hayward-gallery-a-groundbreaking-exhibition-or-1429243.html>, accessed 20 May 2020.
- ¹⁶ Serge Guilbault, *How New York stole the idea of modern art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 and Frances Stonor Saunders *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta, 1999.
- ¹⁷ COLLAPSE, Cullinan Richards, Dispari&Dispari Project, Italy, 2011.
- ¹⁸ Text for Galerie von Bartha Report: Andrew Bick, *gate / grid / tree / (notes/on/concrete)* 14 April -26 May 2018, Lucy Howarth, February 2018.
- ¹⁹ Initial presentation to Modus Operandi and The Crown Estate, April 2017.
- ²⁰ http://www.modusoperandi-art.com/projects/princes_arcade_w1/
- ²¹ Initial presentation to Modus Operandi and The Crown Estate, April 2017.
- ²² See as an unusual example <https://ecstaticrecordings.bandcamp.com/album/white-on-white> an album of experimental electronic music in tribute to Marlow Moss with sleeve notes by Lucy Howarth.