

By Alexandra Parry

2017

How  
Do I  
Make the  
Skyline  
Jump?

Word Count:

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## Impetus

I cannot access many buildings and more frequently public spaces in London without buying or being asked to buy something, and for the last five years I have been entirely reliant on a network of friends to house me.

The ‘housing crisis’<sup>1</sup> in the UK affects millions of people who are unable to house themselves in secure tenancies and the UK government continues to introduce policies that increase housing’s ties to capital<sup>2</sup>. It seems as though housing has become more than ever about making investment through the market, not about making a home. A post-Fordist economy and post-2008 financial crash has seen London’s spatial and architectural landscape increasingly tied to capital and the public realm and public services are silently sold off to private companies<sup>3</sup>. Is there anywhere capitalism cannot go?

I cycle to university, passing through twelve miles of London, from the North East of the City to the bank of the Thames in the South West, via the City and the Houses of Parliament. Whilst cycling I have desires to make rude gestures and shout at the city workers. I have arguments with politicians in my head, imagining what I would say to them if I saw them. The anger is exhausting.

There are mediating tools to my anger on this cycle ride – language, narrative, and imagination. It is these mediations that I have been working with in an attempt to gain a sense of agency back over the city, and transfer my anger into an effective force.

I want to know what language, narrative, and imagination can do.

### *How can I make the skyline jump?*

1 The current housing situation in the UK is often described as a ‘housing crisis’. It is called a crisis because of the large numbers of people struggling to house themselves. A report by the ResPublica think tank says 6 million people face tenure insecurity and no chance of ever buying their own home. This was quoted in *The Guardian*, 20th November 2016, ‘Britain’s housing crisis is so serious that it must be tackled now’ (accessed 11th February 2017) Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/nov/20/britains-housing-crisis-must-be-tackled-now> More information about what Shelter terms the ‘housing crisis’ can be found here, [http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/why\\_we\\_campaign/the\\_housing\\_crisis/what\\_is\\_the\\_housing\\_crisis](http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/why_we_campaign/the_housing_crisis/what_is_the_housing_crisis) (accessed 1st May 2017)

2 The reliance on the state to provide public services funded by private investors can be related back to Section 106 of the Town and Planning Act in 1990 that formalised conditions for investors to pay money for public services to local authorities, meaning that it was in the best interest for local authorities who have increasingly faced cuts to budget to rely on property developments for funding. In recent years, the bigger the development the better, to make up for the 18 billion pounds in funding cuts to local authorities from central government since 2010. This information was found in an article in the Guardian.

Oliver Wainwright, ‘The truth about property developers: how they are exploiting planning authorities and ruining our cities’, *The Guardian* (17th September 2014)

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/sep/17/truth-property-developers-builders-exploit-planning-cities> (accessed 17th May 2017)

3 A database of privately owned public spaces in London ‘private-owned-public-space’ can be found here [https://fusiontables.google.com/DataSource?docid=1lrNKscwda7NNc9rrq\\_Si9dhBqZAby1Cv2Bx-o7s#rows:id=1](https://fusiontables.google.com/DataSource?docid=1lrNKscwda7NNc9rrq_Si9dhBqZAby1Cv2Bx-o7s#rows:id=1) (accessed 21st May 2017)

This was accessed via Jeevan Vasagar, ‘Privately owned public space: where are they and who owns them?’, *The Guardian* (11th June 2012)

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/jun/11/privately-owned-public-space-map> (accessed 21st May 2017)

See also Bradley L Garrett, ‘The privatisation of cities’ public spaces is escalating. It is time to take a stand’, *The Guardian* (4th August 2015)

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/aug/04/pops-privately-owned-public-space-cities-direct-action> (accessed 21st May 2017)

## Grounding the Impetus: Introduction to the Essay

The essay begins by looking at Nine Elms, a major new housing development close to the Royal College of Art in Battersea, that echoes wider global trends of housing’s relationship to capital. Nine Elms functions as a way in and grounding for my visceral anger and enables me to explore in specifics how housing and land is increasingly tied to capital, and who and what is involved in this process. Becoming knowledgeable is perhaps the first stage of gaining power.

The direction of the essay is based on my initial impulses, yet I also explore how they are relevant to the context and current political concerns<sup>4</sup>. Firstly I look at why language might be the most suitable form to challenge the relationship of capital and buildings, inspired by Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi. This is followed by exploration into three different ways that I could use language to gain agency over the buildings in Nine Elms.

I look at how narrative and the stories we tell about an object shape how people view and use the object. I use Barthes and his work analysing myths<sup>5</sup> to de-construct the messages encapsulated in billboards, advertisements, and the language of developers. As well as exploring the power of narrative, the aim of this section is to gain power over Nine Elms through deconstruction and writing *about* it.

Following this, I look at how language works with the imagination to radically alter how the object is seen, and how this inspires action. I look at Laure Prouvost’s sign works and philosopher Paul Ricoeur to do so.

Finally, I explore how language, the body, and matter could be seen as entangled, each of them with agential force. This chapter is inspired by social scientist Vicky Kirby, social psychologist Margaret Wetherell, artist and art critic Travis Jeppesen’s Object Oriented Writing and artist Adelita Husni-Bey’s project *White Paper: The Law* (2015)

It seems timely to consider connections between agency, language, and objects as these relationships seem to be undeveloped despite the rise in theory about object agency<sup>6</sup> in both the fields of philosophy and art<sup>7</sup>. The three approaches I have chosen (narrative, imagination, language-body-matter entangled) all depict language as having varied physical and spatial relation to objects (circumnavigation, inside, all encompassing), that gives the essay not only its structure, but seeks to emphasise varying philosophical relations between language and objects.

Lastly, I chose theory to accompany the text from western-centric philosophy, not because I regard this line of thought more highly than others, but because neo-liberalism is also rooted within this lineage.

4 This stance is inspired by Carol Hanisch’s essay ‘The Personal is Political’ originally published in the feminist journal *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* (1970)

5 I use the word myth here, as it is used by Roland Barthes in his writings on which this chapter of the essay is based.

6 Graham Harman, coined the term ‘object-oriented philosophy’ in his 1999 doctoral thesis, which term was renamed ‘object-oriented ontology’ by Levi-Bryant in 2009. Other influential writers about object agency include Bruno LaTours’s writings on Actor-Network Theory, and Jane Bennett’s book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010),

7 See Gabriele Budach, Catherine Kell and Donna Patrick, ‘Objects and Language in Trans-Contextual Communication’, *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 25, No.4, (2015) pp. 387-400, for a discussion on how linguistics could consider the relationship of language to objects more.

## The Global Housing Market and Nine Elms

Nine Elms is a development on a former brownfield site stretching across 561 acres along the South Bank of the River Thames<sup>8</sup>. The site includes the Battersea Power Station, New Covent Garden Market, and stretches up to Vauxhall. The development is almost entirely funded by private developers, who are building 20,000 new homes, and several public services including two new tube stations, two primary schools, new health centres, and infrastructure such as a riverside walk.<sup>9</sup> The developers include the second biggest real estate company in the world - The Wanda Group<sup>10</sup>, together with Frasers Properties, Taylor Wimpey, Mount Anvil, CLS Holdings PLC, Barratt, St William, St James, Berkeley Group, Ballymore, and St. Modwen.

Roughly speaking, at market rate, domestic properties in Nine Elms development are currently (as of June 2017) priced between £800,000 and £8,000,000.<sup>11</sup> Demonstrative of properties being used for financial speculation, they are bought and sold with huge price fluctuations before anyone moves in.<sup>12</sup> In Battersea Power Station over a few months, the price on one flat had jumped by £400,000<sup>13</sup>. The use of property for capital speculation is exemplified by statistics in The University of Sheffield's report on International Capital Flows into London Property. The report states that, *between June 2012 and 2013, 49% of all residential property sales in London with a value of over £1 million were to international buyers; 28% of these were to non-residents.*<sup>14</sup> This demonstrates that many buyers are not living in the properties they buy, implying that they are using them to profit from through either renting or waiting for the property to increase in value before selling again.

While capitalism seeks out the cheapest resources and labour across the globe, cities across the world have come to rely on land and housing as income. David Harvey writes critically about the increased reliance of capital within the urban built environment, highlighting the global nature of the problem and the consequential dispossession for many people,

*Urbanization we may conclude has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses and has done so at every increasing geographical scales but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that entail the dispossession of the urban masses of any right to the city whatsoever*<sup>15</sup>

Harvey charts the historical transformation of the house built for its use, to the 18th Century when Georgian

- 8 Figure quoted is from the development partnership's website. [nineelmslondon.com](http://nineelmslondon.com) (accessed January 2017)
- 9 <https://www.berkeleygroup.co.uk/press-releases/2016/another-116-affordable-homes-in-nine-elms> (accessed 7th June 2017)
- 10 Its operating revenue in 2016 was 254.98 billion Chinese Yen. <https://www.wanda-group.com> (accessed 25th May 2017)
- 11 It is worth noting that there is properties to rent in Nine Elms at 'affordable' prices, but the key question is affordable for who. This is also not the case in all the developments, such as Keybridge House where 4.5% of the total properties are available at the advisory amount.
- 12 Kate Allen, 'Speculative investors head for the exit in Nine Elms development', *Financial Times* (10th July 2015) <https://www.ft.com/content/8e85675c-2648-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c> (accessed 25th May 2017)
- 13 Julia Kollwe, 'Battersea is part of a huge building project – but not for Londoners', *The Guardian* (14th February 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/feb/14/battersea-nine-elms-property-development-housing> (accessed 25th March 2017)
- 14 Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, 'International Capital Flows into London Property' (February 2016) <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Global-Brief-2-International-Capital-Flows-into-London-Property.pdf> (accessed 5th May 2017)
- 15 David Harvey, *The Right to the City*, p.12, accessed online at <https://davidharvey.org/media/righttothecity.pdf> (accessed 18th January 2017)

town houses were built to be bought and sold, to the recent history of the house as investment, thus,

*about thirty years ago people began to use housing as a form of speculative gain. You could get a house and 'flip' it - you buy a house for £200,000, after a year you get £250,000 for it. You earned £50,000, so why not do it? The exchange value took over. And so you get this speculative boom. In 2000 after the collapse of global stock markets the surplus capital started to flow into housing. It's an interesting kind of market. If I buy a house then housing prices go up, and you say 'housing prices are going up, I should buy a house', and then somebody else comes in. You get a housing bubble. People get pulled in and it explodes. Then all of a sudden a lot of people find they can't have the use value of the housing anymore because the exchange value system has destroyed it.*<sup>16</sup>

What Harvey describes is the context in which Nine Elms exists. In Nine Elms the relation to capital is heightened by the scale of the development, happening over a relatively short period of time<sup>17</sup>, and a lack of state financial involvement in public services where local councils act as advisors, not funders.

Nine Elms, has received less critical attention than other development sites in London, perhaps due to the development being on a former brownfield site. This means there has been less direct displacement of residents, unlike other examples in London such as The Heygate Estate, documented by the blog Southwark Notes<sup>18</sup>, The New Era estate, which campaign was supported by UK celebrity Russell Brand<sup>19</sup>, and The Carpenters Estate which received a lot of media attention through campaigns by the E15 mums<sup>20</sup>, amongst others<sup>21</sup>. Yet, this is a pertinent time for artists to critically question the development of Nine Elms as many influential arts organisations move into the area. Cabinet, Matts Gallery, and Damien Hirst's Newport Street Gallery have been established, have moved or prepare to move to the site, and several contemporary artworks<sup>22</sup> have been commissioned for the 'public'<sup>23</sup> spaces around the development. The Royal College of Art is deeply embedded here and runs the gallery space - StudioRCA Riverlight, which is situated in the heart of

- 16 Interview by Ronan Burtenshaw and Aubrey Robinson, 'David Harvey interview: The importance of post-capitalist imagination', *Red Pepper* (August 21, 2013) <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/david-harvey-interview-the-importance-of-postcapitalist-imagination/> (accessed 30th May 2017)
- 17 The American Embassy announced they were moving here in 2008, The new tube stop was announced in 2014, in 2011 Battersea Power Station site was bought by its current owners in 2012 Wandsworth Council approved Ballymore's 15 acre development, in 2013 work started work on the Nine Elms site. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine\\_Elms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_Elms) (accessed 10th April 2017)
- 18 Julia Kollwe, 'Battersea is part of a huge building project – but not for Londoners', *The Guardian* (14th February 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/feb/14/battersea-nine-elms-property-development-housing> (accessed 25th March 2017)
- 19 Claire Phipps, 'New Era estate: Russell Brand joins residents' protest against eviction' *The Guardian* (1st December 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/live/2014/dec/01/new-era-estate-russell-brand-protest-against- eviction-live> (accessed 25th March 2017)
- 20 Ayshea Buksh, 'Carpenters Estate residents 'face uncertain future'', *BBC* (18th December 2012) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-20762286> (accessed 10th May 2017)
- 21 Pavan Amara, 'E15 'occupation': We shall not be moved, say Stratford single parents fighting eviction after occupying empty homes' *Independent* (Sunday 28 September 2014) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/e15-occupation-we-shall-not-be-moved-say-stratford-single-parents-fighting- eviction-after-occupying-9761186.html> (accessed 10th May 2017)
- 22 Sarah Kwei, 'Focus E15 Mums have fought for the right to a home. This is only the start', *The Guardian* (5 October 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/05/focus-e15-mums-fight-for-right-to-home> (accessed 10th May 2017)
- 23 Map of campaigns addressing housing issues in London 'London Housing and Gentrification Campaigns' <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1leJhKFWQmwLwx4CJehVrvC-A0jo&ll=51.51434956745477%2C-0.09107268225102416&z=11>
- 22 Contemporary artists Simon and Tom Bloor, Sarah Lucas, Simon Fujiwara, and Mohammed Qasim Ashfaq have all permanent artworks installed in the open spaces around Nine Elms, funded by Ballymore and the St James Group. Public Art commissioners UP have also commissioned contemporary artists S. Mark Gubb, Matthew Derbyshire, Nicky Hirst, and Lucy Cash to create temporary artworks for the area. <http://futurecity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Nine-Elms-Art-Guide-Map.pdf> (accessed 10th February 2017)
- 23 <http://www.upprojects.com/projects/vista-develop/> (accessed 10th March 2017)
- 23 I say 'public' in inverted commas as many of the open spaces are actually privately owned.

the development.<sup>24</sup> The gallery is funded by the St James part of the Berkeley Group and the Dean of Fine Art Prof. Juan Cruz, is a member of the strategy board for the entire development. The RCA's support towards the development, as shown within these links, follows a broader trend within the RCA to support and connect with profit making organisations.<sup>25</sup> The tendency of the RCA to make bedfellows with institutions that exist to make profit, is another reason why it felt important to submit this work as a RCA dissertation.

There a number of artists who have made work in the area who are concerned with the development, and I am pleased to join them in an 'archive'<sup>26</sup> that critically addresses the concerns expressed here. Such an archive would include *Doing It in Public* at Beaconsfield Gallery in Vauxhall, an exhibition (3rd - 6th May 2017) focused on public art in the context of Nine Elms and Vauxhall, curated by students from the Curating Contemporary Art Course at the RCA and artist Alice May Williams' film *Dream City - More, Better, Sooner* (2016), which is set in and around Nine Elms.

## Is Language the Medium of Choice to Oppose Capital?

With little surplus capital of my own, language was a practical choice of form for me to work with. As language, imagination, and narrative are free – in a base material sense<sup>27</sup> it sits in opposition to capitalism, thus reflecting my position on capitalism. Language and capital also share a commonality of form, being both invisible, yet have a relationship to material. According to Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Money and language have something in common: they are nothing and yet they move everything. They are nothing but symbols, conventions, flatus vocis, but they have the power to persuade human beings to act, to work, and to transform physical things.*<sup>28</sup> In *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, Berardi points to capital and language's shared historical journey in which they have both increasingly been disassociated from objects, and share a mutual rupture between themselves as a sign and their relation to a referent (object).

*In the sphere of the market, things are not considered from the point of view of their concrete usefulness, but from that of their exchangeability and exchange value. Similarly, in the sphere of communication, language is traded and valued as something that is performed. Effectiveness, not truth value, is the rule of language in the sphere of communication.*<sup>29</sup>

In the case of capital this has been accelerated in a global economy in which the market controls the value of most objects. This means that objects which were once valued by their use, are now valued in relation to the market economy. In addition the form of money has changed from being solely based on the value of the physical object to a digital form. Comparatively, in terms of language, following on from Ferdinand de Saussure's ground-breaking work in semiotics, Berardi points out that language has been removed from its referent through the marketisation of objects and the language of sales.

Berardi argues that poetry is the choice form to deal with language through its use of words that *escape the order of exchangeability*<sup>30</sup>. He argues that poetry is able to slip through the net of capital's tendency to be able to absorb all forms through it being an *excess of language, a hidden resource which enables us to shift from one paradigm to the next*<sup>31</sup>. Berardi's comparison of form are particularly helpful yet his focus on poetry as the form to counter capital is limiting. I will extend this argument further by looking at additional ways outside the poetic form to counter capitalism's dominance over housing.

24 See links between the arts and private property and how art is instrumentalised to sell houses in Anthony Isles and Josephine Berry, *No Room To Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City* (London: Mute Books, 2010)

25 Bluewolf Scholarship RCA by Bluewolf - a 'global business consulting firm'. More information about the company can be found here, <https://www.bluewolf.com/> (accessed 1st May 2017)  
The Abraaj RCA Innovation Scholarship by global investor Abraaj. More information about the company can be found here, <http://www.abraaj.com/> (accessed 1st May 2017)

23 I use the word archive loosely, as there is no current established archive relating to this subject in Nine Elms.

27 To note, whilst language is free in a material sense, the spread of language is not free and highly dependent on a particular context. The spread of speech costs both in monetary terms as well as human freedom as there are many controls on freedom of speech.

28 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, 'Emancipation of the Sign: Poetry and Finance During the Twentieth Century' *e-flux*, Journal #39 - November (2012) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/39/60284/emancipation-of-the-sign-poetry-and-finance-during-the-twentieth-century/> (accessed 1st March 2017)

29 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, (USA: Semiotext(e) 2012), p.138

30 Ibid, p.22

31 Ibid, p.140

## Circumnavigating the Building with Narrative

Using text to create stories about objects is the first of three ways I will explore language's force over buildings in Nine Elms. In Nine Elms the dominant narrative is that the buildings are objects to be bought and sold, which is upheld by a neo-liberal hegemony. This dominant voice is embedded in the language of marketing and found on billboards, and other advertisements. Using Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* as a guide I will unravel some of the myths in these texts and images. Through engaging with, deconstructing, and then writing out these stories I hope to create a counter hegemonic force.

Barthes asserts that myths are a *type of speech* and can surround any form, whether a photograph, text, show, or article. His flatlining of form into objects-as-myth-as-speech, enables the analyst to bring objects and people into a common discourse, in which the object becomes an animistic force. He uses language to unravel these myths (speech) with the aim to untangle a sticky web of cultural construction, and expose ideological forces at play. In his introduction to *Mythologies* (1957) he writes,

*The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which in my view, is hidden there<sup>32</sup>*

Barthes analysis extended Saussure's unravelling of sign and signifier, applying the theory that the object and word are not naturally linked to understanding the constructs embedded in everyday culture. Although he was writing in the 50s his method of analysis is still relevant today, where in a heavily mediated world, images and text are forever vying for public attention.

In Nine Elms, billboards are prolific myth makers. They cover housing developments, providing a shield from the process of work, as well as a cloak to advertise the object to potential buyers. They provide an illuminating entry point to listen to a myth about Nine Elms. Using Barthes method of analysis I have chosen two images to explore. I have highlighted key words in the text, the signs that are key to their myth construction.

**Fig. 1**

### Embassy Gardens Development Advertising

*Ballymore billboard advertising the Embassy Gardens development. The billboard itself is part of an extensive fence covering the build of the American Embassy.*

32 Roland Barthes, From the Preface to *Mythologies*, Trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972)



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The sun is pleasant, falling in between the faces of two beautiful people in the afternoon. They are smartly dressed in suits, and look **wealthy**. The woman is perfectly made up with lipstick, yet her hair is loose.

Perfectly poised between a state of **relaxed** and **professional**, everything is easy, and warm.

The image attempts to create a '**natural**' scene, where the camera has caught a couple in an intimate moment. The woman is forefront in the image, the man is slightly out of focus in the background. They are with us yet away from us. The softness of the lighting in the image suggests intimacy, yet the couple look away from each other and the camera. The man looks at the pavement, the woman upwards, their bodies are facing. I presume they are **single**, two 'attractive'<sup>33</sup> professional people who may meet in Nine Elms.

It is without the unease of London. There are no cars or other people in the background. The image is the opposite of noise. The couple are alone with each other and the building.

It advertises housing, but it is focused on the beautiful couple outdoors. The image is more about the area, the lifestyle the buyer will lead, and who they might meet there.

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#### Fig. 2<sup>34</sup>

##### Leisure Time in Public Space

Promotional image taken from the website <http://nineelmslondon.com/>

The '**public**' are at **leisure**, presumably on the weekend and people are sitting in cafés or strolling around. No one is in a rush and there seems to be no shops with basic services. There are **couples**, (male-female and male-male), **women alone**, and **families with children**. Everyone seems relaxed, enjoying themselves on a sunny day. There are **no teenagers and there is only one person of colour** out of 20 in the image.<sup>35</sup>

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Both images demonstrate the type of person who the developers believe will live at and buy property in Nine Elms and the sort of activities they will do. The rhetoric of the image<sup>36</sup> is that Nine Elms residents are wealthy professionals who have leisure time to go to cafés. Most tellingly there is a construct of whiteness that appears across the two images, which tells us that white people live in Nine Elms, or the people buying want to live with white people. According to the Guardian's architecture and design critic Oliver Wainwright the

33 I use the word attractive, in inverted commas, as this is not my point of view, but is what I believe that is what the couple would be conventionally considered as

34 Interestingly this image featured in an article published by the Guardian, after I had decided to feature it in this essay Oliver Wainwright, 'The property billboards that reveal the truth about Britain's luxury housing market', *The Guardian* (4th April 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/apr/04/the-property-billboards-that-reveal-the-truth-about-britains-luxury-housing-market> (accessed 2nd May 2017)

35 The lack of depiction of people of colour in architectural visions is not uncommon. In 2013 Studio Weave was criticised by Black and Ethnic Minority Network for their failure to have a single person of colour in their architectural visioning of Narrow Way in Hackney. Josh Loeb, 'Race row after Hackney Council 'whitewashes' Narrow Way', *Hackney Citizen*, (18th July 2013) <https://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2013/07/18/race-row-whitewashing-narrow-way/>

36 This term is taken from Roland Barthes *The Rhetoric of the Image* (1964)

image of whiteness is a drive towards sales aimed at the international investor. He writes, *speaking to any property-marketing agency and they will tell you their east-Asian clients are buying a piece of England, which - for them - means blond-haired, blue-eyed Burberry models.*<sup>37</sup> In an enlightening interview Wainwright asked the communications agency behind the Nine Elms development why the people in the promotional material are predominantly white and was informed,

*It just comes down to whatever stock people the rendering company happens to have in its image library. Visualisations are a blunt tool, not something to be relied upon as representative of the place being created. We spend a lot of time discussing what kind of clothes people are wearing, not what colour their skin is*<sup>38</sup>

There is interesting interconnections here between whiteness, capital and land acquisition, which arguably parallels a historical strand of colonialism - dominating a place with white people, or the image of white people. Through Barthes, I was able to see how Nine Elms could be related to a colonial project. This sounds dramatic, but it became more apparent as I started to articulate and then write out the myths.

Following on from this line of thinking I started to consider how descriptions of land used by major housing developers help construct the land. In an enlightening article by Architect Sam Jacob about MIPIM - a global trade fair for property investors, he describes the scale in which large companies are viewing and selling property and land, thus, *8 Billion Euros Under Management! 5 Million sqm Total Surface! 14 000 + New Homes! 128 000sqm + New Retail Space!*<sup>39</sup> Jacob's article focuses on how developers are *speaking cities into existence* and what myths are created by the developers. For me this article shows that what developers are speaking into existence is a land valued in terms of size and monetary value, huge values that allow for an unreality that lends itself to objective distance so that it can be bought and sold. Jacob points out that stories told at the start of town planning will relate to how it will be, which he relates back to the early days of town planning and its entwinement with myth,

*For Plutarch and the ancient world, the origin of cities often involved both improbable myths and rational practicality. On one side would be advantageous geography, rich natural resources, climate and good planning. On the other would be strange stories... These are stories rather than histories. Retroactive imaginings that provide things like moral validation, character and destiny. They seem anachronistic when you compare them to today's world of city-making, which operates with bureaucratic banality, impersonal corporateness and flat PR spin. But if cities don't come from superstitious belief, where exactly do they now come from?*

Jacob's article shows how this definition of place, come to be, that the constructs through text, help make the place what it will become. The content of Jacob's article parallels the imagery used in a birds eye view of

37 Oliver Wainwright, 'The property billboards that reveal the truth about Britain's luxury housing market', *The Guardian* (4th April 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/apr/04/the-property-billboards-that-reveal-the-truth-about-britains-luxury-housing-market> (accessed 2nd May 2017)

38 Ibid.

39 Sam Jacob, 'MIPIM is one big performance with the purpose of speaking cities into existence' *deezee* (23rd March 2017) <https://www.deezee.com/2017/03/23/sam-jacob-opinion-mipim-big-performance-speaking-cities-into-existence/> (accessed 1st April 2017)





Fig. 4

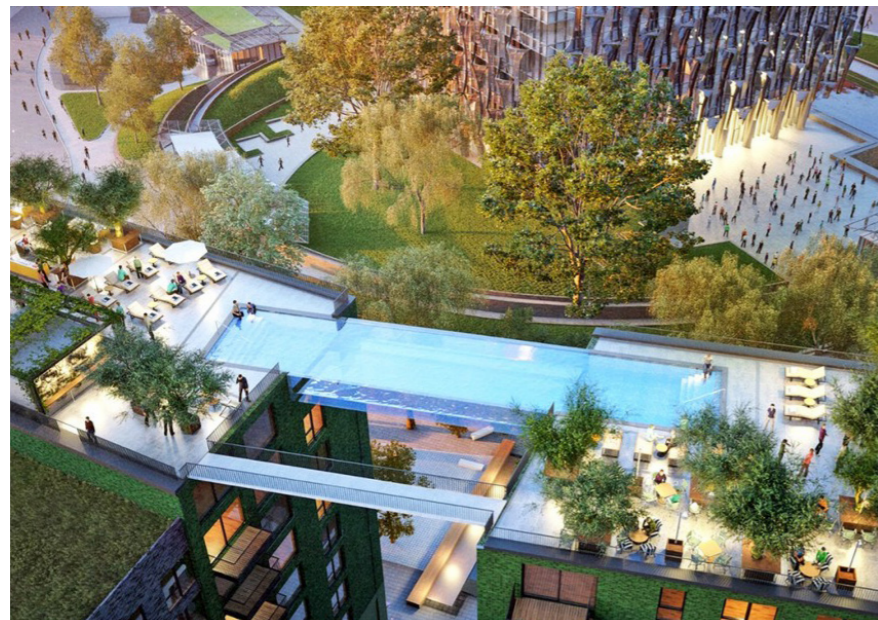


Fig. 5

the Nine Elms development taken from the development partnerships website (Fig. 4), and in an architectural drawing of a skypool planned in one of the developments in Nine Elms (Fig. 4). In 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', Hito Steyerl looks at how the vertical perspective and perceived motion of being in free fall has proliferated under technologies such as satellites and tools such as Google maps, giving a view that exemplifies *class war*,

*This virtual ground creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior spectator safely floating up in the air. Just as linear perspective established an imaginary stable observer and horizon, so does the perspective from above establish an imaginary floating observer and an imaginary stable ground...The view from above is a perfect metonymy for a more general verticalization of class relations in the context of an intensified class war from above*<sup>40</sup>

Developers describe and depict a site from above within a bordered territory, large areas of land or value. The land becomes a bordered mass valued by capital which can be viewed as an object to be dominated and captured by wealth by an elite class. The less entangled with the subjective self perhaps the easier it is to remove the object from the self and sell it. Through viewing the object at such distance using scale and numbers is hyper reflective of a philosophy of separation pioneered and persevered by René Descartes dualistic thought that separates subject and object. In the case of Nine Elms the separation of object from human, pushes away a narrative of housing as shelter.

After researching Nine Elms for several months I realised that I had also viewed Nine Elms in these terms - as a bordered territory, separate, an object in itself. I had separated the site from the surrounding area, just like the aerial images of the development. I had bought the narrative of a brownfield site, in which no one was being displaced. I had been so caught up with the developers and the bordered site, I had forgotten to see it in relation to those who live close by, who too will be affected by the development. This is demonstrative of a neo-liberalism hegemony, that seeps in quietly, and obscures the view.

Furthermore in looking at descriptions of buying and selling houses I found it particularly interesting to consider the meaning of particular words used. Doreen Massey suggests that *the language we use has effects in moulding identities and characterising social relationships. It is crucial to the formation of the ideological scaffolding of the hegemonic common sense. Discourse matters.*

In particular her analysis of the word speculation has particular resonance, thus,

*A second bundle of terms that deserves further attention is that clustered around investment, expenditure and speculation. It should be noted immediately, for this is crucial to what follows, that these terms carry with them implicit moral connotations. Investment implies an action, even a sacrifice, undertaken for a better future, while speculation (here in the financial rather than intellectual sense) immediately arouses a sense of mistrust*<sup>41</sup>

40 Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective' *eflux*, Journal #24 - April 2011, p. 8 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/> (accessed 1st March 2017)

41 Doreen Massey *Vocabularies of the Economy*, p. 11 [https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/01\\_vocabularieseconomy.pdf](https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/01_vocabularieseconomy.pdf) (accessed 2nd May 2017)

Using terminology to describe housing, a word that implies mistrust, is oppositional to the basic needs of someone to house themselves, in a stable environment. If you speculate about the object, you mistrust the object. You want to keep it far away from you. Mistrust is not a home.

A hegemonic narrative of property as private, one that should be owned and dominated, has developed over centuries in the UK. Common rights to land in the UK have been increasingly eroded since the Norman Invasion of 1066 with the rise of feudalism, enclosures made on common land in the late 13th Century and the Enclosure Acts by UK Parliament in the 17th Century onwards. This has further increased under neo-liberalism, in which the property has become an object with which to speculate. It is a story that tells the move away from valuing the object in terms of its use, towards the object as a tool of profit. The myths around Nine Elms all show how housing can become a fetishised object of commodity, a distant object to trade with, one that has historical routes within domination and suppression from one person onto another.

## Moving Matter with the Linguistic Imagination

Current critiques of capitalism, point to the need to re-imagine. To move away from an ideology there needs to be something else, something to go towards. David Harvey points out that neo-liberal hegemony has told us there is no alternative. This plays on a common critique of left politics that it is a negative ideology, which only provides critique of neo-liberalism, therefore continually defining itself in a position of what it is opposed to. Interviewed in 2013 by the socialist publication *Red Pepper*, Harvey says that *it is important because it has been drummed into our heads for a considerable period of time that there is no alternative. One of the first things we have to do is to think about the alternative in order to move towards its creation.*<sup>42</sup> Following this, and in order to re-state Nine Elms as an object not of speculation but of home, a process of imagination can be evoked, that allows for the re-construction of the object.

A formative relationship between imagination, objects and language, and one which indicates an alternative to that presented by the Nine Elms development might be suggested by Laure Prouvost's sign works from her 2011 exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery. This may seem like a strange choice, particularly as Laure Prouvost's work is embedded within an art market, which has parallels with the speculation embedded within the current housing market, and her work is not explicitly political. However Prouvost's work demonstrates language's ability to re-conceptualise the object in a way which can turn the accepted 'referent' on its head. I was also attracted to Laure Prouvost's approach to language and object as it differs from much of the text based artwork in 'public' spaces, which often adopts the form of slogan and advertising. It is rare that text work in the built environment draws directly on the form around it<sup>43</sup>. Prouvost's sign work have also been an important thread informing my practice throughout the past year, and I have used her work in workshops to explain my thinking<sup>44</sup>. This work made me think about the possibilities of language as sculpture<sup>45</sup>, of language's ability to move an image, or reshape a concept, and of language as an animator. It moved my body. I felt it.

Like Barthes, Prouvost's work embodies Saussure's argument that the link between word and object is ambiguous and culturally constructed. She subverts the objects constructed image with text. In accentuating this she allows for the visual re-working of the object. Prouvost uses narrative as a way to lead us on a journey into the fictitious via a path of playful fantasy that stretches the imagination. In the words of Prouvost, *words are the most powerful tool to conjure images without using an image itself. More powerful in fact because a new image is created each time.* Through this visual re-working the viewer is allowed to re-address the object and its meaning. It provides a humorous counter-hegemonic force.

<sup>42</sup> Interview by Ronan Burtenshaw and Aubrey Robinson, 'David Harvey interview: The importance of post-capitalist imagination', *Red Pepper* (August 21, 2013)

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/david-harvey-interview-the-importance-of-postcapitalist-imagination/> (accessed 30th May 2017)

<sup>43</sup> There are many example of text based artwork in public spaces. In this example I was thinking of Jenner Holzer, whose work often critiques power structures through adopting one of the forms of power structures - the slogan.

<sup>44</sup> Over the past year I have run 2 different workshops with students and staff at the RCA as well as sixth form students from various secondary schools in London. The workshops were titled 'Can Language Destroy a Building' and took place on 20 February 2017 at the RCA. More information can be found here <https://www.rca.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/studio-sundown-can-language-destroy-building/>(accessed 14th June 2017)

<sup>45</sup> Some examples of other artists who explicitly use language as part of their sculptural work are artist Lawrence Weiner who has consistently described his text work as being sculpture, and more recently contemporary artist Katrina Palmer has used the narrative form as a means of sculpture. A comprehensive review of artists who work with text (crossing over into the sculptural field) can be found in *Art and Text* (2009) edited by Aimee Selby.



Fig. 6

I look at the orange, and I read the sign (Fig.5) . I take heed of the sign, a form of power, which is typically used by authority to communicate a rule. Yet, this is a sign by an artist telling me that the orange is not what I think it is. She gives creative agency to me. Here, the artist as image maker and me as the audience establish an interesting relationship. I am given responsibility to re-figure the object and create the image. The orange does loops in my mind as I reconfigure its material, its colour, its 'flesh'. The words encourage me to disbelieve the object. Is the object holding something back? Is it my misunderstanding or the object's secret? This gives the object an aliveness, or as artist and curator Sam Belinfante describes it, the language anthropomorphises the object. In discussing Laure Prouvost's work *Its Magic Electronics* (2014), Belinfante writes,

*Without a human body in sight, and guided by its ensuing speech, the voice is connected to the only visual presence in the room - the circular spot of light on the floor. 'I am just a light', she says, a ridiculous notion that is instantly accepted as a truth; the small shimmering pool of light is anthropomorphised as a theatrical being*<sup>46</sup>

It is Prouvost's ability to use words to anthropomorphise the object, that convince us that the object may be something else than it initially appears to be - a moving, shape shifting, undetermined thing. Perhaps the text on billboards outside housing developments can be understood in the same way as Prouvost's sign works. Are they too an anthropomorphising project?

The blog *Development Aesthetics*<sup>47</sup> documents the aesthetics of hoardings outside developments in London. Fig 7 and 8, a photo of a billboard and advertising in Greenwich Peninsula in London, is explicit in the construct of both the buyer and the land. Through proudly adopting the word 'settlers', a term typically used to talk about people moving to an area with the aim to dominate it and the people who live there, it entangles itself in a history of domination and colonialism, constructing the land and the people who live there in a post-colonial image. The buildings and land become something to be conquered, the conquerors are there 'first'. The text seems to unironically embody and encourage practices of gentrification, through saying yes, you will move here and others won't. Thus, the following question should be asked of all billboards that wrap housing developments. What imaginary fields are they invoking, what attachments, and relations are they wanting people to have?

What might a counter-hegemonic text be? Fig 9. is an artwork I created this year, for the WIP (work in progress) show at the RCA. Originally an audio piece, the work invites the audience to imagine the deconstruction of a building (the building is chosen by the audience). This work, although not in the context of Nine Elms, explores how objects might be reshaped via the imagination using language as a medium to do so. Contrary to the style of the slogan the text is a short narrative. The aim of the work is opposed to the political left's call for positive reconstruction through imagination, i.e. something positive to go towards, and this work acts a de-constructive force. Despite this, I hope to use it as a means to demonstrate how I have used text and imagination in the re-ordering of an object.

46 Sam Belinfante and Joseph Kohlmaier, *The Listening Reader* (London: Cours de Poétique, 2016), p.18.

47 <http://developmentaesthetics.tumblr.com/> (accessed 1st March 2017)



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Imagine a Building You Want to Destroy

Look at the building. Stare at it.

Choose an object to knock a hole through the middle of the building.

Choose something heavy.

Tunnel below the building. Go deep down through the foundations, through the layers of soil and clay.

Stop.

Start to shake your body. Shake it so much that the building above ground starts to break apart.

Keep shaking

Stop.

Pull yourself out. Use your hands and your upper body to work your way up through the layers of soil and clay.

You're on the ground. Notice how the building looks.

Put something on top of this new form. Something large. Put something else on top of that. Something even more large.

Then another. And another.

Stand back. Stare at it.

Lick it all over. Every surface that you see. Get into the crevices.

Kick it. With one foot, then two feet. Run at it, jump and kick.

Turn the materials to rubber. Erase whatever is around it.

Find some ratchet straps. Tie these around the mass and tighten the straps.

Get some people that you know or have seen before. Surround the object standing in silence for some time.

Start to talk and say whatever comes to your mind. Repeat the most affective words.

*It is indeed through the anticipatory imagination of acting that I 'try out' different possible courses of action and that I 'play,' in the precise sense of the word, with possible practices'<sup>48</sup>*

What agential force does the imaginative<sup>49</sup> process have? Does the gymnastic limber of the imagination and its creation of another have the potential for political affect? French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur's work focuses on the power of text to induce imagination that leads to action, particularly in his essays *From Text to Action* in 1986. For Ricoeur imagination is imagining something more, bringing forward something else. It is not just continual reflection and pastiche of reality.

In an overview of the philosophy of imagination, Richard Kearney demonstrates how Ricoeur's optimism about the potential power of imagination to create the new differs from other theorists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who thinks that imagination *is a negation of the perceptual world*<sup>50</sup> and many post-modern theorists who argue that imagination is *essentially one of parody*<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur is particular in his approach as he claims that language has a specific relationship to imagination, the *'semantic shock' engendered by the coming together of two different meanings which produces a new meaning*<sup>52</sup>. This opposes like-minded philosophers such as Gaston Bachelard who also thought that imagination could cause action, yet for Bachelard the imagination is visual and is provoked by the visual.

Ricoeur acknowledges the inherent action embedded within the specific words or collection of words, and indicates how this culturally constructed set of words causes action. He draws upon J.L Austin's speech acts theory<sup>53</sup>, which he calls *practical imagination*<sup>54</sup> to do so. In the context of housing this could be related to the act of buying a house, through which the language embedded within the contract constructs the outcome. Yet for Ricoeur the main focus is on imagination as a *process* which is fundamental to further action, thus, *imagination offers the common space for the comparison and mediation of terms as heterogeneous as the force that pushes as if from behind, the attraction that seduces as if from in front and the reasons that legitimate and form a ground as if from beneath*<sup>55</sup> Perhaps this could be related to the buyer, the one on the cusp of their new life, deciding on a new place to live, potentially involving a new place to live, a new job, friends, shops etc.

Ricoeur looks specifically at Ideology and Utopia as two realms in which the social imaginary is at work. The social imaginary draws attention away from the singular subject to think about how the imaginary might be shared across people. For Ricoeur Utopia is always defined in opposition, a proposal for a future based on an ideology that it is against. It is the realm of fiction, of a striving for perfection which he relates to schizophrenia *a logic of all or nothing, ignoring the work of time; a preference for the schematism of space; disdain*

48 Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action, Essays in Hermeneutics 11*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (London; New York, Continuum 2008) p.173.

49 Please note I have chosen to use the word 'imagination', as opposed to 'poetics', as 'imagination' is used by the two theorists Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney that I reference mostly in this section.

50 Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining Modern to Post-modern* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1998) p.145.

51 Ibid. p. 178

52 Ibid. p 148

53 See J.L. Austin *How to Do Things With Words* (1962)

54 Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action, Essays in Hermeneutics 11*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, (London; New York, Continuum 2008) p.174.

55 Ibid. p. 173.

*for intermediary stages and an utter lack of interest in taking a first step in the direction of the ideal*<sup>56</sup>. In addressing the importance of the utopian social imagination, which plays a vital role in the imagining of new realities, Ricoeur noted that

*The problem today is the apparent impossibility of unifying world politics, of mediating between the polycentricity of our everyday political practice and the utopian horizon of a universally liberated humanity. It is not that we are without utopia, but we are without paths to utopia, and without a path towards it, without concrete and practical mediation in our field of experience, utopia becomes a sickness*<sup>57</sup>

Ricoeur was writing this in 1986, but it still feels relevant today. Currently the utopian pathways, in the case of Nine Elms are shaped largely through the developers, who invite the select few - based on wealth, and perhaps race, to live this out.

56 Ibid. p. 181.

57 Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage : Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) p. 31

## Language, Body, and Building Meet

*Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements.*<sup>58</sup>

How do the body, language and material intersect? Up until now this essay has focused on the change to the object because of the social imaginary and how language shapes how people see the object and consequently act towards it. In this way I have depicted the object as separate - an inert force that discourse effects. Object oriented ontology has moved studies in objects and subjects towards acknowledging objects having affective power. Agency has become a force that can inhabit or be inhabited by objects and subjects, and has radically reconsidered the subject - object divide. Following on from this how might language be considered? Can we go beyond binaries of language and material? Could language be considered as a weight, a texture, with agential force to move objects? To look at this in more detail I will explore two artworks that I would like to consider in this theoretical light. One is contemporary artist Adelita Husni-Bey's project, *In White Paper: The Law* (2015), of which part is community legislation against the Dutch squatting ban of 2011 and was written in collaboration with activists, squatters, academics, and legal experts. The second is that the work of artist and art critic Travis Jeppesen and his development of a technique of writing that he calls 'Object Oriented Writing', in which he inhabits objects and writes from its perspective.

The tendency to discuss phenomena in terms of 'separations', is what gives rise to theoretical movements and specificity, yet the tendency of theory to focus in on a distinct phenomena commonly means that it negates another. Perhaps this is when 'linguistic' and 'affective'<sup>59</sup> turns, amongst others, limit themselves. Margaret Wetherell argues that studies on affect, in particular the work of Brian Massumi, have largely kept the body as a central force and language and discourse as less vital and affective, *I agree with Massumi... that it is time to take the effervescent, the mobile, the concrete, and ordinary social action seriously. But, I think one can't do this without sustained attention to discourse*<sup>60</sup> Margaret Wetherell writes that discourse and affect are part of the same thing. She argues that language is entangled with affect and the body. We cannot separate bodily agency from language. They are one thing. Therefore when I read a text my body also reads it. I act with my language and my body. Even when the body or the voice is silenced, they are always in relation to each other. Her bringing together of 'linguistic' and 'affective' is an important step in terms of understanding how other bordered constructs might merge with language.

To return to language and material - what happens if we go beyond binary thought to consider how they might be entwined? In the introduction to a journal exploring why language has been kept separate from material, linguists Gabriele Budach, Catherine Kell and Donna Patrick write that *language was still sliced off from the exterior world and viewed as the property of humans within the social world. Such approaches, while not explicitly counterposing the social world to the material world, rather ignored the material*

58 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Michigan: Open Humanities Press) p. 54.

59 The term linguistic turn was popularised by Philosopher Richard Rorty in his 1967 anthology *The Linguistic Turn* and mainly implies a turn in philosophy to consider language as central to the human experience.

60 Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London : SAGE, 2012) p. 56

*world, as if it did not exist, or was entirely inconsequential.*<sup>61</sup> Like Wetherell Social scientist Vicky Kirby argues that we should look beyond binaries. Her argument extends from the idea that if nature and culture are no longer considered in opposition then perhaps we should reconsider other dualisms. She points to quantum theory to see how the invisible and visible might meet, thus *in a very different field of inquiry the implication between concepts (ideality) and things (materiality) in quantum theory is so profound that it underlines our understanding of their respective difference*<sup>62</sup> Furthermore Kirby argues that if scientific equations, a language of things, is so important to the creation of new things, how can the two be separate? *In the work of Kirby, matter appears as something that is not only spoken about or spoken with, but rather as itself simply speaking.*<sup>63</sup> So does matter talk in the case of housing?

Adelita Husni-Bey's project *In White Paper: The Law* (2015) uses language within structures of law, with the aim to address property speculation by making the use value of property legally constituted. At the heart of the project is the production of a 'white paper'<sup>64</sup> and is produced by a group of people including *jurists, squatters, sans-papiers, academics, activists, and the general public*<sup>65</sup> The group met 5 times in meetings to discuss and then create the white paper, which was endorsed by legal scholar Lucy Finchett Maddock, *Legally, the most immediate use for the convention would be in court where the judiciary could consider the text in their ruling. This public drafting of the law was a modern day reminder of the people as legislators and the unremitting role of law within protest, particularly around the right to housing, the right to a home, and the right to use and not to own per se.*<sup>66</sup> Contrary to many laws, which are made by people in positions of power this document is developed by a collective of people, some of whom are politically and economically powerless (sans-papiers<sup>67</sup>). This project critiques the present, but importantly suggests paths to get to the future. The project is an interesting example of how different forms of language, structures, people, and objects become forces that affect. In terms of language the process of coming together to discuss and agree on the content of the document is combined with the consolidation and mutual agreement of language in a legal document. Through both the slippery process of discussion, and the solidity of the document, it shows multifarious ways of using language to get things done, as well as acknowledging the slippery and solidity of the two processes are interdependent as the white paper is *a continuous collective process subject to yearly review*<sup>68</sup>. Both the formative choice to work within legal structures, to produce a document that has affect, shows the weight of language. The process of decision making to agree on people coming together in real time<sup>69</sup> to discuss and create a language in the form of a document that will have affect on the building, is a fantastic example of how language is deeply entwined with buildings, what happens there, how it is used, and indeed whether it is able to survive. The process of the language creation is also vital here, as is the use of various dis-empowered people to take power through the creation of a legal document. Despite the document not having legal effect, the effort to spread the document, via its accessibility, has a potential to

61 Gabriele Budach, Catherine Kell and Donna Patrick, *Objects and Language in Trans-Contextual Communication*, Social Semiotics, Vol. 25, No.4, 2015

62 Ed. Stacy Alaimo & Susan Hekman, *Material Feminisms*, Vicki Kirby 'Natural convers(at)ions: or, what if culture was really nature all along?' (U.S.A : Indiana University Press, 2008) p. 222

63 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Michigan: Open Humanities Press) p. 108

64 A white paper is a report or guide, which is informative, but also sets out a position that seeks to change policy on a certain issue.

65 See: White Paper: The Law, Casco, [www.cascoprojects.org/white-paper-the-law](http://www.cascoprojects.org/white-paper-the-law) (Accessed 1st June 2016)

66 Lucy Finchett-Maddock, 'Their Law: The New Energies of UK Squats, Social Centres and Eviction Resistances in the Fight Against Expropriation (Part 2 of 2)' *Critical Legal Thinking - Law and the Political* (13th July 2015) <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2015/07/13/law-new-energies-uk-squats-social-centres-eviction-resistances-fight-expropriation-part-2/> (accessed 15th June 2017)

67 Sans-papiers translates into English as without papers. This means people who do not have legal status to stay in the country.

68 *White Paper: On Land, Law and the Imaginary* (Netherlands: Beirut, Casco-Office for ART, Design and Theory; CA2M Centro de Arte Dis de Mayo; and Valiz) p. 49.

69 Not via protracted time that may happen if communicating with over email and social media.

# ON THE USE OF SPACE

Acknowledging that this legal document is a continuous collective process subject to yearly review,  
The adherers to this Convention,

Considering that space insofar as it is a scarce resource in relation to the common good, should be addressed according to use-value principles;

Considering that the use of space for financial accumulation based on its exchange-value cannot interfere with the use-value of space;

Considering that housing, as granted by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights under the "Right to Adequate Housing" (2009), entails protection from forced eviction irrespective of title;

Recognizing that varying forms of occupation are reactions to the social-economic circumstances that produce inequality, vacancy, gentrification, and displacement and limit access to affordable space, and therefore, should not be criminalized;

Considering that a community's right to use, and a grass-roots management of space should be acknowledged, in accordance with the "World Charter for the Right to the City" (2004);

Considering that the real estate sector and the "Commercial Vacancy Industry" stimulate speculation on the value increase of property with the prospect of financial securitization, effectively sustaining rightlessness and reproducing the social-economic circumstances that lead to inequality, vacancy, gentrification, displacement, and limiting access to affordable space;

Considering that detailed knowledge of public and private real estate development, including plans, urban impact assessments, and transparency in contract awarding, should be publicly accessible to provide for accountability and effective tools for arbitration, allowing for local communities to utilize their right to challenge, agree to the following:

## Article 1

### Parties to the Convention

1. This Convention addresses the position of a multitude of groups, individuals and practices that produce an alternative to the notion of property, appropriation, accumulation, exploitation, and individualization in contemporary societies; hereby referred to as "use-value of space" and defined in Article 3 of this Convention;
2. Parties to this Convention are the addressees as defined in paragraph one, without discrimination on grounds of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, age, nationality, employment, income, social origin, or migration status;
3. Each party shall actively take measures to respect, promote, and realize the right to use of space within the scope of this Convention.

## Article 2

### Rightful Claimant

1. Those who, within the scope and spirit of this Convention, infringe on property rights intended as the exclusive rights of use over tangible and intangible assets, for uses a-j mentioned in Article 3, do not pose a threat to national security, the economic wellbeing of a country, provoke disorder and crime as related in Article 8 of the "European Convention of Human Rights" (1950), and therefore should not be subject to criminalization;
2. The "rightful claimant" is hereby defined as they who utilize/occupy a vacant space as defined in Article 3, independently of how such space is obtained: through climbing in, the use of false keys, or a false costume, with or without knowledge of the title holder as referred to in Article 13B of the Dutch Criminal Code. This practice is encouraged in groups, in accordance with the spirit of the Convention;
3. By no means and under no circumstance shall an officer of the law forcibly remove the rightful claimant as defined under paragraph 2 above, or material objects found in the space, as referred to in Article 551a of the Dutch Code of Criminal Procedure. Contested occupation will be addressed in accordance with Article 3, paragraph 4.

## Article 3

### Use-value of Space

1. For the distribution of space according to use-value principles in view of creating and/or protecting the commons, defined as the cultural, habitable, and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, held in common, without discrimination, irrespective of title, through radical democracy.

The types of use-value production, within the scope of this Convention, are defined as for:

- a. Residential living, as the centre of one's existence;
- b. Occupation for the purposes of political pressure, social responsibility, and solidarity;
- c. The production of spaces of experimentation, in relationship to communing, decision-making processes, and organization;
- d. Activities engaging in expanding access, in relationship to health, ability, and with the intent to offer support;
- e. Purposes of ecological and environmental sustainability, including the preservation of resources, flora, and fauna;

- f. Production of community and common practices, including spirituality, art, and culture;
- g. Production and sharing of knowledge and skills in a pedagogical environment;
- h. Production of goods and services following cooperative, local, not-for-profit, socially, and environmentally sustainable principles, engaging workers regardless of legal status or the legal right to work to ensure the means for unalienated reproductive labour, with the intent to reduce precarity, and for the temporary storage of goods related to these services;
- i. Spaces used for purposes of "Commercial Vacancy Industry," where the user adheres to the Convention, relinquishing the contractual basis for its previous use;
- j. Spaces in preparation and realization of refurbishment, insofar as reasonably necessary in duration;

2. Uses mentioned under a-j, in accordance with the principles of this Convention, cannot be subject to eviction but may be subject to contestation, as mentioned in paragraph 5;
3. Uses under paragraph 1, a-j will not be recognized under this Convention if employed for purposes of personal financial accumulation;
4. Acknowledging that the right of use is a collective endeavour, aimed at producing a collective use-value ("social use values"); these values need to be collectively decided upon following transparent decision-making processes as defined in Article 5;
5. Uses under a-j that have been established in spaces that are not vacant according to Article 4, are subject to principles of proportionality and subsidiarity. Contestation of the application of these principles will be subject to arbitration under Article 5.

## Article 4

### Vacant Space

1. The spaces defined as "vacant" under the terms of this Convention, are:  
  
Terminated use, 6 months after use has come to an end, unless the owner or rightful claimant (of uses mentioned under Article 3, paragraph 1, a-j), can provide evidence of a concrete prospect of imminent production of use-value, in which case contestation can be arbitrated under Article 5;
2. Terminated use, less than 6 months after it has come to an end, in the absence of a prospect of use-value production, e.g. demolition;
3. Underused space defined as less than 1 person per 50 square metres where use-value production will not negatively impact uses under Article 3, paragraph 1, a-j;
4. Spaces defined as vacant under this article can be subject to occupation under Article 3, paragraph 1, a-j.

## Article 5

### Arbitration

1. In the event of contested use of space, "rightful claimants" and the Local Maintenance Fund (see Article 6), where applicable, will negotiate the use that is most relevant to the vacant space.

2. Parties enter negotiations without distinction between the value of their interest;
3. The negotiation process must engage one or more members that are not parties to the contestation;
4. Use-values or "social use values" produced in accordance with Article 3 have preeminence over other use-values.

## Article 6

### Local Maintenance Fund

1. Parties to this Convention are encouraged to create or adhere through membership to a Local Maintenance Fund intended to guarantee long-term usability of space in absence of title;
2. Spaces will be maintained to a standard that the user finds acceptable, hereby referred to as the "living-condition"; if the user ceases to find the living-condition acceptable they may apply to a collective fund, hereby referred to as the Local Maintenance Fund;
3. The Local Maintenance Fund is managed by the parties to this Convention, as defined in Article 5, through a transparent decision-making process;
4. The Local Maintenance Fund is administered and capped by the parties according to need and urgency of request, and is secured without discrimination on grounds of race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, age, nationality, employment, income, social origin, or migration status;
5. All users contribute to the fund according to a sliding-scale user fee;
6. In case of the necessity to vacate a space the Local Maintenance Fund will offer temporary housing, with the intent to uphold the "right to return." In case the right to return cannot be upheld parties to the Convention will provide alternative space in accordance with the spirit of the Convention;
7. Participation in the Local Maintenance Fund can be refused if the user intends to and is able to carry out repairs autonomously, or offer time, materials, or skills;
8. In case of major refurbishment work the Local Maintenance Fund, and consequent work, can be delivered in order to guarantee long-term usability of space;
9. The objectives of the Local Maintenance Fund are to be further described in a Local Maintenance Fund Charter.

The "Convention on the Use of Space" is a legal instrument drafted between March and May 2015 in the Netherlands as a response to the housing crisis: the lack of affordable homes, absence of provisions for those without legal right to stay, rising rents, and the criminalization of squatting. The writing process entailed a series of public drafting meetings with a diverse range of participants: lawyers, activists, academics, squatters, researchers, and cultural workers. Future public reviews will be held in different European countries with the hope of producing a "European Convention on the Use of Space."

www.useofspaceconvention.org

create a movement that potentially will. This echoes David Harvey's comments that,

*'The right to change the city is... a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization.'*<sup>70</sup>

The document is able to be distributed to large areas and many people, as it is downloadable from the internet, and can adopted and adapted by those who want to use it. The language and form, becomes the core of a movement of people in various places around the world demanding for land to be valued on the basis of use. So what about Nine Elms? Could the white paper produced in Husni-Bey's project be used in this case? Perhaps, this is part of a future project?

Attempts to reflect object oriented ontology in writing have been made by artist and art critic Travis Jeppesen, whose writing inhabits objects with language. His aim is to expand the field of art criticism from that of the description of the art object to something that is from within the art object. Describing object oriented writing as a child whose *father is the Gertrude Stein of Tender Buttons, the mother the Roland Barthes of Mythologies*<sup>71</sup> he writes from the object's point of view. Jeppesen describes this method as inherently failed, *I acknowledge that object-oriented writing will always be, in its essence, an act of failed translation. But I am interested, as always, in the potentialities of a spectacular failure, rather than adding my murmur to the monotone that comprises today's art critical chorus.*<sup>72</sup>, although perhaps through the process of putting yourself into the object an empathetic relation is created, whether cultural, political, or subjective, which allows for a different relation with the object. This is always a tender balance, as Svenja Bromberg writes in her article for Mute Magazine 'The Anti-Political Aesthetics of Objects Worlds Beyond', that the current fashion to give agency to objects distracts from the man-made politics and economics of the object. However, I think this misses the point, as it perhaps object oriented ontology, encourages people to listen more carefully and consider those outside of themselves.

70 David Harvey, *The Right to the City*, p.12, accessed online at <https://davidharvey.org/media/righttothecity.pdf> (accessed 18th January 2017)

71 <http://disorientations.com/2011/10/13/towards-an-object-oriented-writing-%E2%80%93-or-%E2%80%93-how-anti-formalism-helps-me-dream-notes-on-an-idea-plus-an-announcement/> (accessed 1st May 2017)

72 Ibid.

Fig. 10



## Concluding Remarks

It seems that there is no one linguistic solution to gain agency over economically speculative buildings, but many. Care over semantics used, dialogue, narrative, and laws, can all work (together) to unravel housing's ties with the speculative market, and bring it back to its original use value of shelter and home. Met with a common desire the invisibility can be made visible.

Yet, language does not exist in isolation, it is used by man and there are complex power structures at play in the human world that influence language and its affect. Thus beyond techniques and forms of language, there needs to be a focus on who is creating the language and how. Adelita Husni Bey's project was influential in recognising the many different agents at play and how language, objects, and people can work together to make this happen echoing what David Harvey calls 'collective power'. Only through collective power motivated through common objectives to return housing to their use value, can there be a counter to the hierarchy of big business, and other organisations that make up the hegemony.

Likewise language should also be recognised as being informed by the object's agency, that it is not independent of the objects themselves, and that objects also help construct language.

The relationship of agency to language to material is little explored and this work only scratches the surface of what could be a more comprehensive study that brings fields of linguistics, philosophy, and art together. I hope to have explored what power language has in Nine Elms, but also what possibility I have to seize power over Nine Elms. This essay has given me time to reflect, as well as time to gather ideas and thoughts for future work there.

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