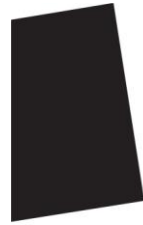


Bernd Behr: COMMA 17

Essay by Rob Tufnell



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Bernd Behr's looped video projection *Weimar Villa (Unreconstructed)* (2010) depicts a series of uniform, white, skull-like concrete housing shells set amidst mounds of mud. Behr documents the later stages of the construction of a housing scheme as walls are painted, pipes are fitted and the surroundings are landscaped. The scene has a strong sense of the 'unheimlich' as the forms are familiar and yet the context and their uniform repetition are not. This uncanny affect is heightened by Behr's decision to screen the footage in reverse. The work could also be seen to record an archeological excavation of another age rather than the birth of something new (albeit pastiched from the relatively recent past). The development is captured in stasis, robbed of its future, hovering uncertainly between past and present.

Weimar Villa, the immediate subject of Behr's film, is a housing development currently being constructed as a satellite of Anting New Town an hour's drive north of Shanghai. The town was built to plans commissioned by private developers from the German architect Albert Speer Jr (AS&P), the seventy-five year old, eldest son of Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's architect and Minister for Armaments and War Production.

The Chinese developers were eager that Anting would become something of a replica of the German city of Weimar famous for both its architecture (medieval to Modern) and significant former resident philosophers (including Goethe, Nietzsche and Schiller) and musicians (Bach, Strauss and Wagner). The town is intended to serve the region's burgeoning motor industry - particularly the collaboration that is Shanghai Volkswagen Automotive and the Shanghai International Formula One Grand Prix circuit.

In 1919 *The Bauhaus* school was founded in Weimar by Walther Gropius "to create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist." Such a progressive and socially conscious endeavor would have assisted AS&P in persuading their clients in Anting to adopt a Modernist scheme for at least part of the development, rather than the pastiche of vernacular German, Renaissance-style buildings that they had intended for the whole development. The model for the resulting *Weimar Villa* was the *Haus am Horn* built in 1923 to a design by Georg Muehe (with additional interior design works by László Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer). *Haus am Horn* was intended to be the first of many



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model Modern villas constructed to accommodate the staff of the Weimer Bauhaus until the school lost support and funding from its chief sponsor, the Thuringian State Government. In 1925 the regional government passed from being under the control of the Social Democrats to that of the German National People's Party (soon to ally themselves with the National Socialists) and the school moved on to Dessau.

Just as in 1925 when the *Haus am Horn* faced an uncertain future so does *Weimar Villa* today. AS&P were paid for their designs but lost control of delivery. The specifications for the houses were downgraded and they have been rejected by the expatriate German managers of Volkswagen for whom they were intended. Meanwhile authorities in Dessau also face confusion concerning the architectural legacy of the *Bauhaus* as they are faced with decisions concerning the excavation and proposed restoration of another model housing project designed by Walter Gropius for László Moholy-Nagy (1926) that was bombed in 1944. The foundations have been unearthed and there are plans to rebuild the structure and, in doing so, destroy much of the original footprint. The relative modesty of Bauhaus buildings lie in sharp contrast to those of Albert Speer's National Socialist endorsed neo-Classicism. Speer designed his buildings with ruination in mind. His 'Ruinenwerttheorie' required that his buildings should be constructed from stone with no iron supports so that they would (like the structures of the Roman Empire and the Classical architecture of ancient Greece) have a legacy lasting for millennia.

Weimar Villa (Unreconstructed) follows a number of works by Behr that explore themes of entropy and Modernity – apparently oppositional themes. *House Without a Door* (2006) explores the replica Berlin social housing scheme designed by émigré architect Erich Mendelsohn to test incendiary bombs in the Utah desert in 1943. *Hotel Palindrome* (2006) records the recollections of two Professors of architecture who attended a drunken slide lecture given by Robert Smithson in 1972 on the *Hotel Palenque* ('a ruin in reverse') at the University of Utah (where, incidentally, drinking was and is prohibited). *Amoy Gardens* (2003-7) documents the large housing and retail complex in Hong Kong that was the epicentre of the region's 2002 SARS outbreak and is accompanied by an audio recording of an extract from *Exact Air* - Le Corbusier's treatise on hermetically sealed architecture.

Commissioned for Bloomberg SPACE, *Quasicrystal Compass* (2009-10) is a more self-conscious meditation on concrete as a medium. Rough cast from timber carcassing the separate components reference the late Modern Brutalist forms pioneered in Britain by Denys Lasdun and Alison and Peter Smithson. These distorted geometric forms fold in upon themselves without any practical purpose or reason. They return concrete, a recycled rock, back to its source to appear as geological specimens or fossils. Concrete sees the pulverised particles of igneous rock suspended in cement to form a material that mimics the traditional building blocks that are instead formed from thousands of years of primary or secondary sedimentary deposition, heat and pressure. Concrete is the physical embodiment of our accelerated age and will in the future form the fossils of our digital era. Although mounted upon chair legs manufactured by Fritz Hansen from designs by the Danish Modernist architect Arne Jacobsen, notions of form and function are abandoned.



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They are instead objects for contemplation, inspired by Chinese scholar's stones, recalling each of the four essential aesthetic ingredients for these twisted rocks, defined in the Tang dynasty as: thinness (*shou*), openness (*tou*), perforations (*lou*), and wrinkling (*zhou*). Within the context of modern building construction techniques such descriptions would appear as negative criticism implying instability rather than qualities to be prized. Thus the works could appear as models for follies recalling the sham ruins constructed within the estates of aristocrats in the eighteenth century. Although these architectural *memento mori* represented collapsed civilisations they were built to affirm new ones - articulating a longevity of tradition and supposed cultural sophistication.

Pacific Heights (2010) is a set of cast concrete, triangular, frame-like structures which again see a convergence of the ancient and the Modern. They are inspired by the early 20th Century crystalline vision of Expressionist architects such as Bruno Taut viewed from within, rather through the traditional, ornamental Chinese window grille that developed in the tenth century. Such grilles are themselves something of a contradiction as they display status whilst simultaneously obscuring it.

Protorelics (2010) returns to the legacy of Le Corbusier - the pioneer of rough cast concrete. The work consists of a series of sand-cast flat panels of differing size and shape formed of cement and a black sand aggregate. These deliberately ambiguous forms at once appear as precast construction components for some future, unspecified project and yet in some ways resemble archaeological relics of, for example, petrified planks. The works also recall a swathe of monochromatic monoliths from more recent culture that look both to the mythical past and the future such as sculptor John McCracken's ongoing series of lacquered planks (1966 -), the flat obelisk featured in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and 'the object' designed by George Hardie pictured on the cover of Led Zeppelin's album *Presence* (1976). They appear to have a significance beyond their simple, prosaic material forms.

Being sand-cast the *Protorelics* recall the panels designed by Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis for the concrete 'stomach' that was the Philips Pavilion built for the Brussels World Fair in 1958. Each are unique, their moulds necessarily destroyed as they are formed. Black sand, created by elemental action on volcanic rock, also brings to mind the black beaches of Santorini in the South Aegean. Such sands are witness to the cataclysmic volcanic eruption in the middle of the second millennium BC which destroyed the Minoan civilisation centred on neighbouring Crete. The excavation of such lost civilisations invariably leads to further destruction as other layers of historical detritus are disturbed. Behr's recent works find their focus in such predicaments. They explore apparently oxymoronic notions of simultaneously revealing and hiding at the same time, looking at the past as it once looked to the future. His work addresses such cycles of history embodied in something resembling a conceptual mobius strip – excavations of the future.

Rob Tufnell

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