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SILENCE, COUNTERFEIT AND AESTHETIC ACT IN  
ALEX MORRISON'S VISION OF "ACADEMIC FREEDOM  
AS ACADEMIC" – INSTALLATIONS OF THE PHANTOMS  
OF A UTOPIAN WILL

**ALEX MORRISON**

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“A photograph of the Krupp works or of the A.E.G. reveals almost nothing about these institutions, tells us nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations — the factory say — means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed.” We must credit the Surrealists with having trained the pioneers of such photographic construction.<sup>1</sup>

—Berthold Brecht, quoted by Walter Benjamin

Alex Morrison has created a compilation of aesthetic objects that illuminates the dour words “academic freedom.” Since this is a time when cultural institutions like the gallery, the museum, the university would seem to have no need to worry too much about “academic freedom” that is not related to a specific figure or works challenged because of offending some organization or cause, it may appear to be an abstract or exotic subject. When such formidable cultural Institutions find themselves supported by the civil society and liberal democracy that by and large pays their bills through grants and foundations and, in the case of universities, through students who are deeply in debt to their future, it is possible that one might view academic freedom with a jaundiced eye as an annoyance. The freedom to express dissident views would seem to be outmoded as a worrisome problem. The avant-garde does not really worry. Certainly “academic freedom” is not a force for revolutionary thinking or acting. The aura

of something archaic hovers over the seven memorializing objects in Morrison’s small pantheon of objects. And that is just the point. One should look carefully at how the archaic hovering over these works serves a not-yet-conscious effect — a mimesis effect — of how architecture has become an object itself that illuminates a graveyard of something vanished. What may appear as abstract in the works is in fact an important aesthetic and ethical act for the here and now.

The politics underscoring these aesthetic objects shows how difficult it is for a new generation to figure out where the university is in the public realm. The president of Simon Fraser recently opened SFU’s new School of Contemporary Arts, which will become a large part of a redevelopment scheme to refurbish Vancouver’s poorest quarter, “The Downtown Eastside”, with the words “This investment in arts education will further support our economy by helping attract and create the creative class that is powering many of the world’s most dynamic cities.” Academic freedom for the “creative class”? The class unconsciousness in these words shrieks out in Morrison’s figurative *Proposal for a New Monument at Freedom Square*. The other works become a scenic chorale dialectically related to *A New Dawn Rising*.

*A New Dawn Rising* reveals the inner shape of the new generation’s destiny. Together with a companion piece *The Poetics of Grey #6* with its coloured triangle atop a bent-over pinnacle we see a utopic mirror image of an anticipatory illumination of an abstract future. Like a conning tower overlooking the nameless grey architecture the immanence of an era passes into a wasteland of space. Arthur Erickson’s concrete pylons leave no room for the flâneur, the loiterer, the straggler, the messenger, the huts or the palaces. Class itself is blocked out by a devotional piety to style. And the era of “academic freedom” belongs

to the lost legacy of the utopian will that produced the social movements mediated through universities, which began, not in the 1960s, but with the critiques of the military-industrial complex in the 1950s with the witch hunts in the universities for communists and others who did not sign loyalty oaths. These legacies are clamped together in the DVD *We Dance on Your Grave* where we watch a counterfeit rendition of that past, which slacks into merely empty ornamentation. One can't help but extend this view of these gravediggers into a longer view of the past. We are looking at a generational expression from an artist who stands upright looking unflinchingly toward the monopoly capitalism that has engulfed the university today. His treatment of the university as a set of objects suggests that the university is a means of production that is architecturally concealed and screened by the "grey on grey" of the architectural scenarios. These objects do not invite us to revolt against the history that made them what they have become in the new millennium, but invite us to see the pathos of the generation that wonders what this "academic freedom" thing is all about: the University now lurks in the grey fog of the cipher in joining itself through a mimetic effect that joins it to the culture at large. The contours are gone. Countless studies about the university have produced a grey on grey journalistic oeuvre that has changed nothing. Morrison's aesthetic objects are not deaf to his generation's resistance to specious sentimentalizing of the past. Architecture of walls and corners eliminates even the Minotaur-like labyrinths that would harbor crowds and mythical beasts, instead of barricade-less spaces.

Aesthetic objects, how artists think, the public realm, social movements — these cannot avoid being placed against the ideological project of the refurbished cultural institutions that have marked the period since the formation of Simon Fraser University in 1965 when the university became a modern scene of progressive education that framed a would-be

vocabulary of cultural change. This theatrically inbred scene of buildings high up on a small mountain highlights an age when building universities made reputations and future fame for the founders. Many other universities from the early and mid-1960s now lastingly wave at us from a generation ago. Even the cultural institutions that have orbited around the ideals of post-1960s cultural reform have assimilated the very core of the avant-garde artistic and intellectual movements of the middle of the century. *Arriviste* and avant-garde, they popularized the idea of knowledge-for-all in a form that has now become commonplace and harmless. The core of both the gallery and the university may have been at the time synonymous with the turn in artistic thought toward a new artificialism with all of the originality of manifesto-intense art forms asserting the compilational potentials of art and poetry, image and language as a technology of means and end.

The great montage artists of the generation on the wane, like John Heartfield (d. 1968) and Hannah Hoch (d. 1978), Georg Grosz (d. 1959) had long before inserted 'academic freedom' into the public discourse. Artistic form criticized the idea of "progress" in culture and art by conflating both with mass consciousness and propaganda. They condemned, not condoned, the bourgeoisie's holding onto the culturally dominant institutions. The energies of insurrection were everywhere, not just in surrealism. The notion of progress in education and the arts also lead to a new form of narcissistic, institutional self-identification with progressiveness as a form of freedom in the name of metropolitan values of the avant-garde. The self-appointed vanguard universities continued to woo culture by gambling with philanthropy and mass cultural institutions. This reveals the inner logic of accommodation to the capitalist experiment of mastering monopoly capital at all costs by harnessing institutions to idyllic views of the landscape. Mastery is the name of the game. Great moments of modernism would not exist without it. But yet....

The nature of this form through which the institutions dominate culture is the pretense embedded in the architecture of cultural suburban settlements like Simon Fraser University where the culture makers see themselves as natural outgrowths of their will to perform in a vanguard-like fashion; they do not administer transient historical institutions at all, but in fact secure reality as the only constituted social form because they have answered the call of the showpiece — the buildings — and in that way hide the mediations related to its existence. The students, then, become petty bourgeois apprentices waiting for entrance into the middle class that they richly deserve. The architecture says so.<sup>2</sup>

Alex Morrison's route into this generationally transitory world arrests the trek into the future and stops time for a brief moment in order to catch a glimpse of the falsification of the institution as a "polis" that is signified by the vanguard architecture. His is a view of the university as phantom-like emblem of the avant-garde on the road to corporate identity. University Reform in a modern sense historicizes itself as a generational rupture with the past, and in this way is characteristic of art movements revising themselves. The architectural building styles become partners with a new collectivity in the quest for a unified polis envisioned through the designed cult manias of architecture as monuments in which the users, as Walter Benjamin writes, are

"the distracted masses [who] ... absorb the work of art into themselves. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective."<sup>3</sup>

Where is the independent thinking, and where the autonomous groups and independent artists who struggle both with the dematerialization of art and the incorporation of art into the cultural institutions — the museums

and universities? The Faustian Bargain made, universities became the bellwether institution that would define the future of culture by giving culture a name: progress in the name of semblance. A critique of Semblance would be the underlying meaning epitomized by Morrison's compilation of seven objects.

Yet because the "post Generation" has been labeled with so many different identities one should be cautious of falling into the trap of thinking about generations themselves as a clear expression of any new utopian will or collective identity. The power of forgetfulness in regard to the nature of the university's direct route into its corporate persona is such that one almost believes that the power the university ever did have lead to the unblocking of the possibilities in the human being's immeasurable powers and that this place of unblocking would be the ultimate settlement of a community of intellectuals and students. This is the illusion that it would lead to something other than the curse that now inhabits all of society, not just the individual in the university: namely the isolation, dissociation and loneliness of being found inside of a counterfeit polis atop Morrison's tower.<sup>4</sup>

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Already immanent in Arthur Erickson's Concrete Polis of Monumental Architecture is the melancholy of desire that reminds us of the loss of the totality of previous historical movements. The melancholy core of the very being of today's students and professoriate is compromised by grief, regret, and powerlessness — that is, by the unfinished nature of the grey inner world, a kind of homelessness. This also represents the falseness of even the higher cultural kitsch found in the joyfully willful message of the new architecture of the Royal Ontario Museum by Daniel Liebeskind. One needs to keep reminding oneself that the museum and the professoriate

are the most privileged segments of a class society, and yet do not express their roles directly in the brutal class and cultural struggles of one of the most deeply exploitative periods of history. Autonomy may be a good if it remains independent. All of this is expressed in the greying of the architectural massifs that look to me, as a former historical participant in this particular university, more like expressionist sets from Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*The Poetics of Grey*). The poetics inside the grey, whether of SFU or Erickson's Courthouse in downtown Vancouver, also reminds one of Alfred Kubin's pencil sketches and drawings of a phantasmal reality — a habitat without people: people seen as the melancholy object of desires unmet.

In the DVD *We Dance On Your Grave*, the documentary view of Simon Fraser's 40th Anniversary Party is transformed into a slow-motion silent video of pathos-ridden dancing on the premises of Arthur Erickson's imitation Crystal Palace Mall. Alex Morrison prepared the video by filming the celebration of a fabricated public sphere. The video reveals no genuine joy or celebration of the origins of a university in 1965 in the muddy construction site of the time, but reveals a form of stupidity about their own amnesiac actions. It is fake. It mimics the dropout culture by dropping in. This is the kind of stupidity that comes with the erasure of history and the substitution for historical consciousness — displacing any class-consciousness — with ersatz carnivalesque posturing. This is not a celebration of individual memories but of the taboos on "academic freedom" that appear artistically as a strange concoction of exotic costumes that imitate the now mythical "Sixties." In the context of the entire installation this integrates the objects into figures of loss. The camouflaging of the legacy of academic freedom across the centuries becomes reified nonsense commingling with a question of "Why Are We Here At All?" It suffers from the veneer of coerced participation in a pop-cultural event. In another room of

the Gallery there is the crew-necked bearded academic manqué with a large head and spindly legs — *Proposal for a New Monument at Freedom Square* — screaming madly about nothing we know about into the void of the art gallery. The figure looks like a fugitive from Red Grooms' *Ruckus Manhattan* (1975/1976) or from a Kienholz installation. It also reminds me of Karl Marx's tomb in Highgate Cemetery in London. There Marx's oversized head sits on a small podium almost mocking the class struggle by saying "I'm just the big head and no body." Mockery lurks behind Erickson's architecture which functions as mere punctuation marks for a memory that dwells nowhere. But what mocks what? One thinks of iconographic statuary of Stalin and Lenin, or even The Palace of Soviets that received proposals from Le Corbusier and Gropius (who later protested the final results). Tatlin's *Model to the Third International* (1919) might well be reflected in Morrison's glass tower.

The DVD installs capital 'M' Memory in the abstract. The creative class dances. Unknown to these dancing participants, their movements reverberate with a Norman Rockwell, Carl Spitzweg folksy aura of the homey. They are in a Happening taking place in some place — no place — that is at sometime, somewhere, but we don't know what it is or where, but we know what it feels like — kitsch — because in coming closer to it we hear the melody of a sentiment for nostalgia attached to the beating heart of the common man who reduces life to the median. The student as commoner. No elitism here. No class. We all dance together to the same tunes. The populist university created by the Social Credit visionaries in modernist splendor in 1963 had every intention of intervening in the public sphere with the values of modernism. Arthur Erickson's architecture offered pastiche modernism of weathered concrete that would make it possible to imagine the future. Yet something is wrong with the party and the vision: somnambulism. Morrison understands this aesthetically by presenting

the 40th anniversary party through the technically sharp images that combine silence and imitation of movements all in the name of miming emptiness. The figures are blind to knowing what it is. The concluding scenes of Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966) come to mind. Mimesis is the other side of blandness and mute silence.

What is the university both as agent and actor located in the public sphere? Can it be conveyed by a collection of objects? This is the critical and aesthetic challenge. The crisis of the nature of the university as a modern place of assembly is built into the distant views of the wilderness and the city, dominated by the geometrically rule bound architecture. It must serve as both a house of learning and a socially engaging space. In my experience of living and working in Erickson's allegorical house of learning it utterly fails in its purpose to be a socially engaging place. The anodyne corners always obstruct the possibility of even a minimalist sociality. The architecture buries the private realm in the false image of an artificially picturesque public realm. Resistance to the social is internalized in the obstructions created by the grey concrete. The medieval idea of the university on which empathy with learning is based lies in the capacity to reflect and also resist the social world that gives it meaning. It is, as Morrison recognizes, based on a view not only of the freedom of academics to be learned, but whether they can defend this idea outside of these walls, and against those who would ruin it internally by the seductions of religious, political or, today, by corporate sponsorships that mirror the commercial needs of the society. Whether we like it or not this implicates the university as a place in the struggle for the emancipation from reactionary forces of anti-enlightenment. Put more philosophically, the university struggles with, and personifies the great Hegel's notion of the unhappy consciousness, the institution and constitution of the alienated soul struggling for autonomy between the

earthly world of existence and the spiritual, that is cultural, aura represented by the university seen through today's counterfeit culture.

For Alex Morrison's generation this struggle does not appear to be totally meaningful as a struggle. The "memorial" of his *Folk Riot* construction shows the truth of the failed revolution of the utopian nature of the 1960s. It all falls in lapidary fashion to the field of forces seen in the emblems of a failed avant-garde institution. Academic freedom is a hollow phrase. Growth dominates. Yet in the 1930s the intellectual pogroms, censorship, political trials, burning of art and books, the exiling of the intellectuals and then the witch hunts of the 1950s and then the rise of student opposition to the Vietnam war have become largely mythology for the current generation of students. Whitewashed by the counter-revolutions of universities in the 1970s and 1980s, the grey on grey has been ornamented by the Multiversity Walmart of everything under one roof. While protests wane and the intellectuals become greyer the term "radical" comes to mean literally nothing when one tries to situate it today by imagining that the university is a social movement. Even the "war on terror" with its attacks on free speech and surveillance mentality does not galvanize the professoriate out of institutionally defined roles. Morrison's work in this sense is a work about generational literacy at the edge of history, not the mantra of The End of History perhaps self-importantly preached by the crew-necked model who protests to the air in clay and wood. This *Proposal for a New Monument on Freedom Square* is also about how the weak class-conscious movements that sought to bring public universities into historical view have become phantoms of immanence, manically transcendent only to be left to the abstract beauty of Morrison's *Picture for a Glass Tower (New Dawn Rising)*. The new monument moves from bitter to cynical in the way the revolution as idea moves to commodity from its original

allegorical model of the melancholy of desire. Tatlin's *Monument for the Third International* (1919) may be a melancholy precursor.

Seen historically, portraying the idea of a university through visually sensual means has rarely been attempted. Learning has been portrayed through the reading and writing of books, or observing scientific experiments, or through the death of martyrs like Socrates, but often through culture seen through the ruins of architecture. Even the self-portrait is a mode of learning that represents knowledge outside of the institutions. Architecture becomes an allegorical viewpoint in the way panoramas of classic architecture reveal the ruins of older civilizations. One thinks of Gian Paolo Panini's *Roma Antica* (1756/57) or interior images of the great libraries of the universities and monasteries of the west. Put another way, the physical image of the university as a location is deeply embedded in the historical weaving of secular, royal, and bookish mediations of knowledge into an arcade in the older sense of knowledge as a threshold — a library between worlds. One might even think of reading itself as an image of threshold learning, for example in the collection of photographs *On Reading* by André Kertész (1971), or Jeff Wall's *The Giant* (1992), a photomontage, which shows a posed, nude, older woman in a reading room of a library standing ethically upright reading from a slip of paper.

Turning to the theme of architecture as an arcade-like reference point for this generation, one wonders whether a generation-that-comes later is perhaps sick to death of architectural immanence in their lives. This to me is prefigured in the image of Abstract Beauty in the triangular structure *Picture for a Glass Tower*.

But first we must deepen this sense of generational transmutation of ideas through the aftermath of aesthetic objects.

Walter Benjamin himself was caught in the struggle of generations. He teaches us that all art is an unfinished project and that the next generation that comes after the deluge of capitalism and war, and the neutralization of violence into myth and force of law, cannot necessarily be trusted to complete the project of the enlightenment without sacrificing itself to the overwhelming forces that required enlightenment in the first place. What is the nature of that sacrifice? In his writing he became the artist self-consuming himself by using his life as an allegorical paradigmatic model of the very story he was telling about his generation. In this way his work is both a phenomenological excavation of the sources of his thinking — how artists think — and a representation of experience in art that exists side by side with ritual, religion and magic. The end result is his conceptual history of concepts where he searches the scarified history of art and literature for evidence that the Kantian ethics that underscores his independent anarcho-modernism can be architectonically compiled into a Marxian arcades-like concept of the present. This view of the present will enable us to experience now time as a utopic, conceptual, revolutionary organization of the field of forces that became modernity, but also became, in its duplicity, an adjunct to the spectacle that capitalism has also become; what is needed is a range of aesthetic objects that speak to that duplicity. The pseudo-polis of the university, emblematically Simon Fraser, is that duplicitous adjunct to capitalism.

The immanent nature of Morrison's generational view of the 1960s dematerializes the generations and, aesthetically, reveals through a process of excavation how the architecture is a graveyard in which the past is embalmed.

Morrison's dramaturgy, if I may call it that, expresses both the calamity of the process of playing with academic freedom as if it were merely academic, and the difficulty that the recalcitrant nature of his material has in speaking on its own about this melancholy of desire. In this regard the materials he uses, the compilation of it into an arcade-like system of colportage without a pedlar or flâneur, or student, speaks to the actual state of affairs of thought about the university today: not only is it a failed avant-garde institution, but a headless monstrosity that has cannibalized itself so that only phantoms exist — the shadows that sit inside of and around the architectural field in *Grey on Grey*.

Simon Fraser's architecture used as historical emblem speaks to the architectonic rendering of the counterfeiting of a scholarly settlement and the erasure of the past. In this sense, then, the university's glamorous architecture does us a service in announcing itself without knowing itself as a cultic happening, which is what the inhabitants would dearly wish it could be since the cult of the past announces itself by denying the terms of its existence in the hidden struggle of classes that lies deep in the underbelly of this society.

The beauty of the abstract triangle *Picture for a Glass Tower (New Dawn Rising)* lies in its fractured light, its aura and its colour and is thus a utopic moment waiting for an event to reveal itself as a need that does not go away. This could also be a way to remind those who would interpret it this way as a monument to the invisibility of the future and, as well, to the spell of the veneer that casts a sense of futility toward the university in the minds of the generation of those younger.

## NOTES

1. Bertolt Brecht quoted by Walter Benjamin in "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, trans. Edmund Jephcott, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass and London, 1999.

2. I came to SFU, in Vancouver, Canada, in 1965 — this has been over half of my life devoted to teaching and writing in areas that were unusual in Canada at the time — European literature, culture and how artists think as such, during and after the political changes around them; how depth psychology influenced our reception of literature and art was important to the social history of art. Informed by anarcho-Marxist social thought, I always attempted to find new ways to integrate these with the intellectual world that had to learn how to criticize the system of learning itself — the Institution of the University. This in itself was not original, and all academics were certainly not intellectuals, and certainly universities were always reflecting their social roles; but I did not define this as simply working in the institution as much as I would have liked to, but making ideas available to the public, which included primarily the classroom. The classroom was the "public" — it was a special obligation because the form of teaching was as important as the content. The form of teaching was the life and death of the institution. Teaching at the time was by definition in the weak sense "radical" because teaching was a risky leap into the unknown. Like cultural bungee jumping, you are pulled back to the thought that this all might not last — something was always in the wind to censure it or organize it. The risks of the classroom presented a choice, whether to take one road that is prepared for you by allowing yourself to join the crowd, or whether you leave some surplus knowledge behind for those who would have to face the system outside the walls. The classroom was the only way to keep alive the idea that a radical pedagogy with utopian outlines would not be suffocated by careerism, professionalism or even the ambiguous notion of "relevance" and up-to-datism that the university has now adopted and manipulated into its very own sloganeering about being the custodian of progress in a designed world. In this regard the trauma of birth of a new institution that provided a

home for the New was remade as a form of new brutalism when the Institution regrouped and made itself available to all segments of the society as the place where class conflict and conflict itself did not and should not exist.

3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," [1939], Volume 4, in *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass and London, 2003, p. 268.

4. "Revolutions are innervations of the collective — attempts to dominate the second nature, in which the mastery of elemental social forces has become a prerequisite for a higher technical mastery of

elemental natural forces. Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so every revolution sets its sights as much on currently utopian goals as on goals within reach. But a twofold utopian will asserts itself in revolutions. For not only does the collective appropriate the second nature as its first in technology, which makes revolutionary demands, but those of the first, organic nature (primarily the bodily organism of the individual human being) are still far from fulfilled. These demands, however, will first have to displace the problems of the second nature in the process of humanity's development..." Walter Benjamin, fragment, "A Different Utopian Will", in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, trans. Edmund Jephcott, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass and London, 2002, p. 135.