UTOPIA PRESS
ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART

THE ENGLISH SERIES

SIMON MORLEY

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WITH 20 ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR

UTOPIA PRESS
ART FIRST CONTEMPORARY ART
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THE ENGLISH SERIES

In the works I've made for this exhibition I certainly don't intend to be nostalgic, though the mood may well be elegiac. My sources focus on two inter-connected themes. The first concerns the idea of 'Englishness' and is grounded in what Peter Ackroyd, in *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002), calls the 'territorial imperative', the acute awareness of the *genius loci* – the sense of a place where, as he puts it, 'the echoic simplicities of past use and past tradition sanctify a certain spot of ground'. The second theme is somewhat broader and addresses the notion of a united 'English-speaking' culture incorporating not only the Commonwealth but also, more significantly, the United States: a culture united by common language.

The idea of a 'territorial imperative' is evoked through the works based on the covers of the series of books published by Collins in the 1940's entitled *Britain in Pictures*, also by the text from a poem by Rupert Brooke superimposed on old postcards, and by the video of the M25 motorway at night. The latter idea of the unity of English-speaking peoples is addressed by my paintings based on the title pages of the four volumes of Winston Churchill's magisterial *History*, written largely before the Second World War but published in the 1950's, and also by the paintings made using the Penguin poetry anthology first published in 1956.

Both ideas of 'English' or Anglo-Saxon culture were always imaginary, the fantasies or dreams of unity that today look more and more archaic, even pernicious. Which isn't to say that they aren't still there to haunt us. Think of how a sentimental and commercialised notion of 'heritage culture' is promoted, and the way in which the 'special relationship' with our fellow English-speakers across the Atlantic is characterised.

Stylistically, the works in the exhibition engage with certain radical tendencies in modern art: the monochrome painting, the collage, the ready-made, conceptual art. Here too are powerful dreams – dreams of utopia, of the universal, of making a better world. These dreams were also always imaginary. But they too still haunt us.

Simon Morley
August 2007

English Cricket (1946), acrylic on canvas, 2007, 16 x 12 inches

Maybe you'll be fine and England will just be a normal bloody country and everyone will forget all that balls about it mattering how you talk and us being better than everyone else in the world, Christ, that would be good! Maybe that'll be your England. But I dunno, Tommy. Sometimes I think England is just too far gone.

James Hawes

Speak For England, p. 317, Vintage Books, London 2006

A History Of The English Speaking Peoples, Vol. I, 2006, oil on canvas, 39⅜ x 29½ inches

A History Of The English Speaking Peoples, Vol. II, 2006, oil on canvas, 39⅜ x 29½ inches

A History Of The English Speaking Peoples, Vol. III, 2006, oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 29 1/2 inches

A History Of The English Speaking Peoples, Vol. IV, 2006, oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 29 1/2 inches

LITTLE ENGLANDS

Simon Morley's work deals in abstractions. Seen from a distance, his paintings evoke the modernist tradition of the monochrome, with their suggestions of primordiality and immanence. Closer up, another level of abstraction is revealed, in the sense of his use of words – the book titles or pages of text he incorporates – and the entry into the symbolic realm of language. And it's the feeling of being caught between these two kinds of abstraction that gives the works their peculiar tension, their powerful sense of crisis and suspension.

There's also another meaning of abstraction to consider: that of ideas, products of the imagination. In *The English Series*, Morley invokes a nexus of ideas to do with history, nationhood, and communal identity. And it's crucial to realise, too, that Englishness, and England itself, are also just ideas. Benedict Anderson, the pioneer of International Studies, has famously described the modern nation state as 'an imagined community' – where members hold 'in their minds . . . the image of their communion'.[1]

For Morley, also, nation-states are simply states of mind. His work is a portrait of England, in which England becomes something ghostly and vapourous, never fully apprehended; ethereal as a memory; fugitive as a thought.

Morley's starting point is always a work of literature – he collects books with 'English' in the title. And, according to Anderson, the invention of nations and nationalism also depended on works of literature – as the emergence of 'print capitalism' and the development of 'national print languages' enabled the formation of a common discourse, a communal mythology. England's particular communal mythology is, in this sense, remarkably self-conscious and self-regarding – almost half of Morley's *Britain in Pictures* paintings are to do with literature; and the stories they tell are about a uniquely distinguished language, the literary vitality of its native speakers, and pride in the national canon. But does this literary multiplicity mean, then, that England is actually multiple nations, contains several versions of itself?

In *The English Series*, Morley explores the ways in which the abstract concept of England gets reified, gets thought of as real; and how it functions as a kind of metonym, standing in for

ideas do with empire, Britain, or tradition. Just as the motif of beaches in the postcard works and in *The Last of England* indicates the geographical limits of the nation, the nation as physical entity, so all of Morley's work can be seen as an attempt to map the psychic dimensions of ideas of nation.

England, after all, is not a fixed or stable concept. Rather, its ideological territory is perpetually shifting, shaped by the currents of language. It has undergone periods of ebb and flow, expansion and retraction – a constant negotiation between internationalism and inclusivism on the one hand, and an inward-looking insularity on the other. Sometimes, too, the changes can seem abrupt and dramatic – and particularly so in the frontier region; that area known as 'little England'.

The phrase 'Little England', in its current meaning, implies a particularly small-minded, boorish type of nationalism, if not outright jingoism – a form of English cultural chauvinism based around ignorance or intolerance both of the wider world beyond England and also of minority cultures within England. As such, it describes an explicitly right-wing set of beliefs – or rather, it provides a stereotype of right-wing beliefs: a way of labelling the casual xenophobia routinely expressed in *Daily Mail* editorials, say, or the bigoted parochialism of speeches by Tory politicians.

But it wasn't always thus. Throughout its history, little England has undergone several, dramatic reformulations. Coming into common use during the Boer War (1899–1902), the phrase was – as nowadays – a pejorative, but with an almost exactly opposite set of party-political associations. That is, it was a term used mainly by Conservatives to disparage those of a more politically progressive mindset – the 'radicals' and 'peace-mongers' who opposed the excesses of patriotism which had led to Britain's involvement in the South African power-struggle.

Originally, then, little Englandism was a form of anti-imperialist ideology. Little Englanders were people of various political persuasions – from Gladstonian Liberal to out-and-out socialist – who believed that the British Empire should be restricted to domestic borders, should extend only over the United Kingdom itself (it is, of course, ironic that such an anti-imperialist conception of Britishness should be described solely in Anglo-centric, implicitly imperialist, terms). Although its first written usage was recorded in 1895, its roots

lay in the history of earlier 19th century progressivism: ideals such as pacifism, humanitarianism, and economic liberalism. Amongst early Victorians, indeed, the notion that Britain's economic interests would best be served by abolishing the remnants of her mercantilist empire was, if not quite orthodoxy, then certainly widespread. But by the late 19th century, and leading into the early 20th century, a groundswell of popular imperialism resulted in an ardent Anglo-Saxonism becoming the norm: a belief in the unique genius of the English race and the dignity of their ancient liberty, combined with a missionary enthusiasm for the global propagation of English values, character and institutions.

In this context, little Englanders were popularly derided as betraying the cause of Empire, traitors to the English nation. They, on the other hand, saw themselves as nationalists. They argued in the name of precisely those same English freedoms and institutions, which they saw as being threatened by the forces of imperialism and colonialism, and which they wanted to preserve. The economist, J. A. Hobson, for example, having reported on the Boer War early in his career for the *Manchester Guardian*, theorised how imperialism, by encouraging the development of a specialised military class, was fundamentally inimical to and destructive of rational, democratic societies.[2] Fear of national decline was, indeed, central to the little Englander mentality – an anxiety that a diffusion of English values would lead inexorably to their dilution and corruption. Many little Englanders were small-c conservatives, who associated imperialism with the debilitating influence of modernity – such as G. K. Chesterton, who advocated a return to 'our ancient interest in England', as opposed to 'our quite modern and quite frivolous interest in everywhere else'.[3]

It was such ideas to do with a core of hallowed, ancient, quintessentially English values that helped little Englandism gradually – but particularly after the imperialist cataclysm of World War I – shed its pejorative connotations. And while, to a certain extent, the phrase retained certain nuances of left-wing anti-imperialism – so that, for instance, the socialist historian A. J. P. Taylor could, as late as 1976, describe himself as 'an unrepentant little Englander'[4] – by and large it became reconfigured as a cultural, rather than political statement: as a celebration of the familiar traditions and quiet stoicism of the English people.

The changing idea is perhaps best expressed by J. B. Priestly. In his book, *English Journey* [1934], he expresses regret that he was not born early enough to be called a 'little Englander' – meaning, that is, in a political sense. But he also gives the phrase a different inflection:

'That little', he wrote, 'sounds just the right note of affection. It is the little England I love', and went on to elaborate such typically English scenes as pottering in the garden, cricket games on the village green, and pleasant country pubs – a portrait of rural England that finds echo in several titles in Morley's *Britain in Pictures* series. It was a reading of Little England that reached its apogee during the early years of World War II, as Priestly's hugely popular BBC broadcasts expounded the ideals of homely comforts and modest domestic pleasures, constantly reiterating the notion that an Englishman's home is his castle.[5] And it's particularly significant, for instance, that *Life Amongst the English* – from *Britain in Pictures* – is symbolised by the image of a hearth, the home fires burning. Above all, this was a conception of Englishness that valorised the common people, their common decency and courage; and took pride in the nation's smallness, its splendid isolation and plucky indomitability.

At the same time, a different – or, perhaps, reciprocal – conception of Englishness was being formed. Its figurehead was Winston Churchill. A hero of the Boer War, he embodied martial masculinity as opposed to domesticity, national greatness rather than smallness. Whereas Priestly was a self-declared 'pipe-and-slippers' man, Churchill's symbol was his cigar, with its aristocratic associations and metropolitan sophistication. Most significantly, he stood for the unity of Britain's colonial possessions, for a just empire that would carry the torch of ancient English freedoms into battle against the dark spectre of totalitarianism.

Also in contrast to little Englanders, with their reverence for the past and traditionalism, Churchill was, in many ways, much more forward-looking. In particular, he recognized America, rather than Britain, as the future global superpower. Feeling it his personal mission to unite the two countries under the banner of Anglo-Saxon culture, he believed that it was through America that the spirit of Englishness would lead the world. During the war, he inaugurated the 'special relationship' with America – both the concept as well as the phrase – which survives to this day. He even liked to describe himself as 'an English-speaking union in my own person' – referring to his own mixed parentage of English father and American mother.[6] And during the 1950s, when the issue of America's cultural influence was being sharply debated – from conservative, knee-jerk outrage against transatlantic imports such as rock'n'roll and horror comics, to the inclusion of Emerson, Frost, and other American poets in the *Penguin Anthology of English Poetry* – Churchill published his bestselling *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. Giving only cursory mention to the Commonwealth countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and virtually ignoring non-Anglo-Saxon

cultures such as India, the book focused on the political history of England, Britain, and the USA – the expansionist, manifest destiny of an informal, English-speaking empire.

The irony is, of course, that it was Churchill who, more than any other figure, came to symbolise the values of little England – and, for present-day little Englanders, still does so, perhaps slightly eclipsed in recent decades by a symbolic female counterpart in the form of Margaret Thatcher. The explanation for this current incarnation of little Englandism lies with the post-war patriotism of English colonial settler communities, and their formation of 'little Englands' in overseas countries: the Kenyan homes fashioned in an English rural style; the white farmers in Rhodesia cultivating their privet hedges and neat herbaceous borders – small corners of a foreign field that would be forever England. In this way, a Priestlyite, domestic, familial version of little Englandism became annexed to an imperial identity.

And, as the fifties and sixties progressed, and faced with a series of national, anti-colonial uprisings by native peoples, those pockets of white, Anglo-Saxon communities came increasingly to see themselves as under threat, as beleaguered and embattled. At the same time, anxiety about the violation of the domestic sanctuary also took root in England itself, where immigration brought, as it were, the colonial frontier home; and led to fears about the dilution of Englishness with ethnic otherness, and the loss of traditional English values. It was in this context that, after his death in 1963, Churchill – precisely because he signified English imperial dominance – was adopted as an icon for a new, reformulated, imperial little Englandism: a symbol of a lost age of English supremacy; of dreams of past, and future, glory.

It's this idea of loss that is the basic truth of all versions of little Englandism, its constant focus down the years: the threat of losing one's home and homeland; the idea of losing touch with tradition, as well as a corresponding anxiety over the corruptions of modernity; and a reverence for the past, a kind of mournful desire to return there.

Simon Morley's English Series encapsulates such loss. It doesn't define it – that would be paradoxical. But it does evoke it. The works are deliberately elegiac – from the tone of the Rupert Brooke poem and the use of old postcards, to the colours he chooses for his paintings: the autumnal array of the *Poetry Anthology*; the luxurious, romantic hues of *Britain in Pictures*; or the sunset-to-twilight progression of the *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.

And at a more formal level, there's loss, too, in Morley's acts of translation – unlike the original book covers from which they are derived, his paintings do not open up, do not give way to deeper revelation. Instead, there's that sense of suspension; the experience of abstraction. Words hang sharply in monochrome space. Blocks of text are colourfully, neatly obliterated. In the video, pixels of light glide across vast darkness.

Indeed, another meaning of abstraction involves, precisely, loss – abstraction in the sense of removal, of being stolen away. This distressing emptiness – a feeling of sudden, yet ever-present absence – lies just under the surface of *The English Series*. The works seem to struggle to contain it, barely keeping it suppressed; obsessively repeating the word 'English' like a protective mantra. At the same time, they seem to reflect an opposite longing: the desire to do away with language; to get beyond symbols, words and icons; to locate a definitive, essential, eternal truth.

An immutable, irreducible Englishness is, of course, a fantasy. *The English Series* shows us this, as it traces the shifting currents of imagination. And as such, each work can be read as becoming its own 'little England' – simultaneously promising and mourning its own little version of England.

Gabriel Coxhead

September 2007

1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edition), Verso, London and New York, 1991

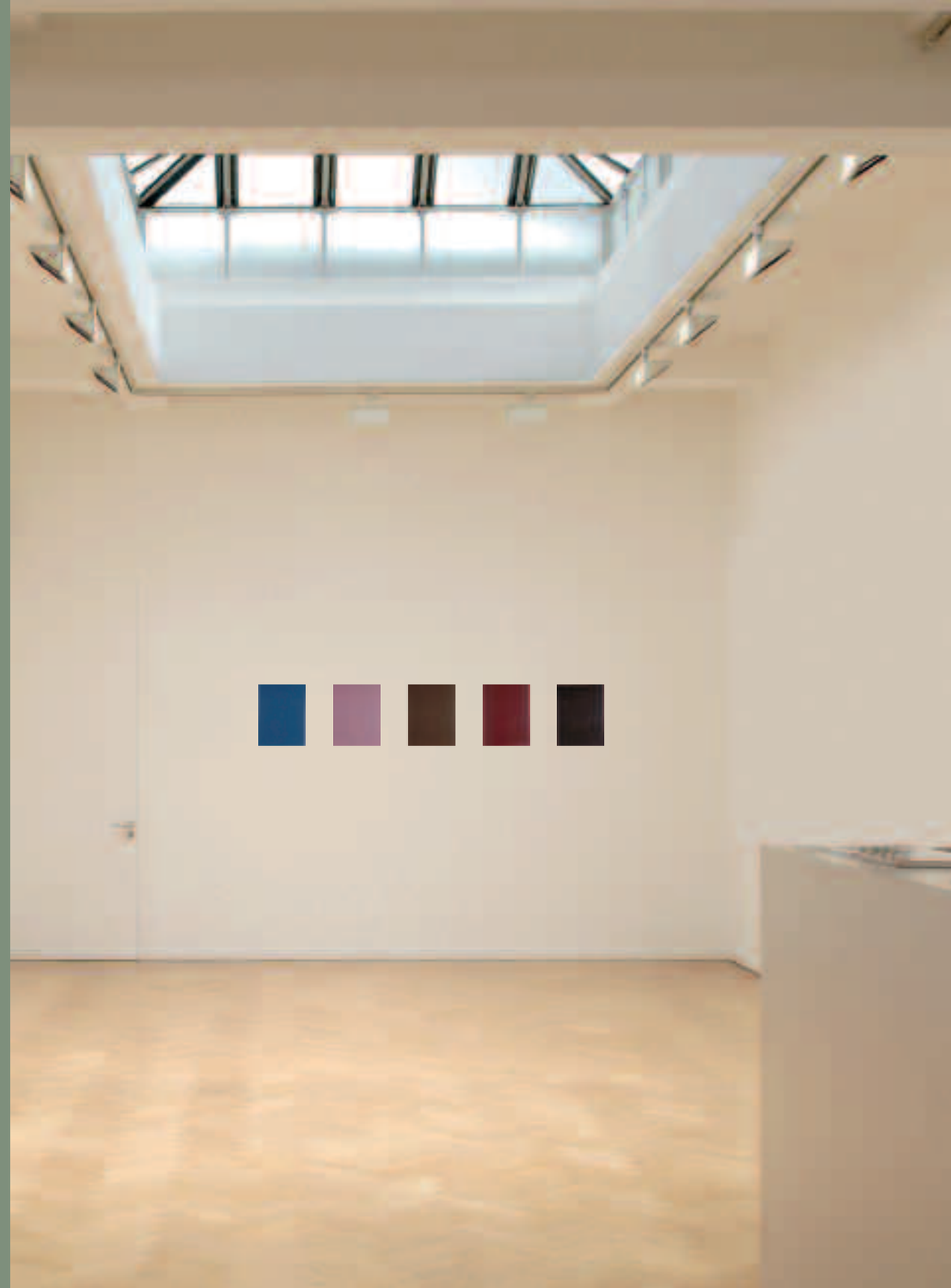
2 E. Green & M. Taylor, 'Further Thoughts on Little Englandism', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, Vol. 1, Routledge, London, 1991

3 Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939–1965*, p. 130, OUP, Oxford, 2005

4 Richard Gott, 'Little Englanders', in Samuel, *Patriotism*, op cit

5 Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, p. 36, Publisher, op cit

6 John Ramsden, *Man of the Century: Winston Churchill and his Legend since 1945*, Harper Collins, London, 2002

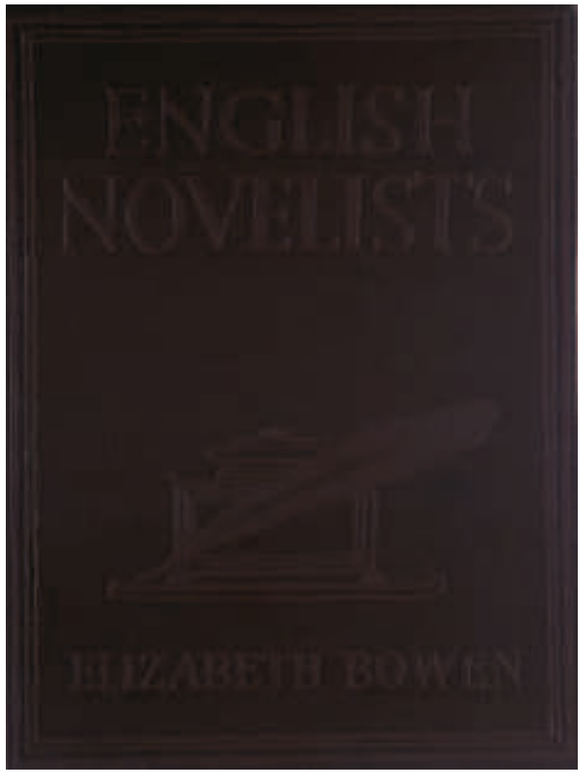


Life Among The English (1942), acrylic on canvas, 2007, 16 x 12 inches

English Education(1941), acrylic on canvas, 2007, 16 x 12 inches

English Diaries and Journals (1943), acrylic on canvas, 2007, 16 x 12 inches

English Popular & Traditional Arts (1946), acrylic on canvas, 2007, 16 x 12 inches



English Novelists (1942), acrylic on canvas, 2007 16 x 12 inches

English Gardens (1944), acrylic on canvas, 2007, 16 x 12 inches

From 'The Soldier' (Rupert Brooke), vinyl lettering on 24 post cards, each post card 3½ x 5½ inches

Selected pages from: The Penguin Book of English Verse (1956)
acrylic on 50 book pages, each page 7 x 4? inches, 2006–2007

Selected pages from: The Penguin Book of English Verse (1956)
acrylic on 50 book pages, each page 7 x 4? inches, 2006–2007

The Secret Garden, 2007, video with sound, 17 minutes 27 seconds
(The M25 Motorway at night filmed near Westerham, Kent)

SIMON MORLEY

Lives and works in France

EDUCATION

BA Modern History, Mansfield College, Oxford University

MA Fine Art, Goldsmith's College, London University

REPRESENTATION

Art First (London), MetisNL, (Amsterdam), Taguchi Fine Art (Tokyo), Zonca & Zonca (Milan)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2007 *The English Series*, Art First, London

A Short History of Dutch Painting, Part II, Metis-NL, Amsterdam

Classic Japanese Movies, Taguchi Fine Art, Tokyo

2005 *Bookpainting*, Fiera del Libro dArte, Palazzo del Re, Bologna

VIRUS, Taguchi Fine Art, Tokyo

A Short History of Dutch Art, MetisNL, Amsterdam

Rossa, Spazia, Bologna

Reading Room,with Maria Chevska, MOCA Peckham and Peckham Library, London

2004 *A Short History of Modern Japanese Fiction* (in translation), Taguchi Fine Art, Tokyo

Solo Presentation, MiArt, Milan (Percy Miller Gallery)

2003 *Post Card*, Percy Miller Gallery, London

The Life of Things, 3 Degrees West Gallery, Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere (Artist-in-Residence exhibition)

The Unfortunate Tourist of Helvellyn and his Faithful Dog, 3 Degrees West Gallery, Wordsworth Trust

2002 *Italian Holiday*, Zero arte contemporanea, Piacenza, Italy

2000/1 *The Collected Works of George Orwell, and Other Paintings*, Percy Miller Gallery, London

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006 *Les Mots pour le faire*, with Yves Chaudouet and Maria Chevska, Musée Romain Rolland, Clamecy, France

2005 *A Picture of Britain*, Tate Britain, London

Ex Roma, Abbey Award Winners' Exhibition, APT Gallery, London

Lost and Found in Translation, Newlyn Art Gallery, Newlyn, Cornwall

Art is a Word, Benefit exhibition for the Museums of Israel, Christies, London

2004 *Melt*, British School in Rome

Gallery Artists, Taguchi Fine Art, Tokyo Compass, Sala 1, Rome

Ancoats Hospital: After L. S. Lowry, Nunnery Gallery, London

The Book Show, The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, Cumbria

2003 *The Book Show*, curator/exhibitor, Nunnery Gallery, London

A . . . parole, Cortili di Casa Sanna-Meloni, Berchidda, Sardinia, as part of Del Segno, Del Suona e della Parola, PAV

The Unfortunate Tourist of Helvellyn and his Faithful Dog, exhibition conception, design, and contribution, The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, Cumbria

The Cover Theory, Ex-Centrale Electrica, Piacenza, Italy (curated by Mario Sinaldi)

2002 *Sumptuous*, Ex Macelli Pubblici, Prato, Italy (curated by Palazzo delle Papesse Centro dArte Contemporanea, Siena)
LUltima Cena, Castello delOvo, Napoli, Italy (curated by Massimo Sgroi)
Fluent: Painting and Words, Camberwell Art School Gallery, London
Red Spy, Fortezza della Brunella, Aulla, Italy La Forma delle Forme, Villa Braghieri-Castel, Modena, Italy
New Religious Art, Henry Peacock Gallery, London
The Open, *Liverpool Biennial*, Liverpool
Bibliomania, edited by Simon Morris, Printed Matter, New York
Fabric, Abbott Hall, Kendal
Private Views, London Print Studio, Herbert Read Gallery, KIAD, Canterbury
showhouse, PM House and Gallery, London
East Wing No. 5, Courtauld Institute, London
2001 *Artmart*, 291 Gallery, London
EAST International, Norwich (selected by Mary Kelly and Peter Wollen)
Wax, auction in aid of Cancer Research
Closer Still, Southern Arts Touring Show: Winchester School of Art and Artsway, Sway
2000 *9,8m/s2*, Zero arte contemporanea, Piacenza, Italy
Art Futures, Contemporary Art Society, Barbican, London
Occupation Studios Fund Raiser, Platform Gallery, London
The Wreck of Hope, The Nunnery Gallery, London, (artist/co-curator)
Chora, Abbot Hall, Kendal, South Hill Park, Bracknell; Hotbath Gallery, Bath
1999 *Chora*, 30 Underwood Street Gallery, London (artist/co-curator)
Six Young British Artists, Gallerie Axel Thieme, Darmstadt, Germany
The Discerning Eye, invited by Charlotte Mullins, Mall Gallery, London
Hub, curated by Above/Below, Bishopsgate, London
Nineneninetynine, Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London
Wunderkammer, 13 Laburnum Lodge, London
After Jackson Pollock, Sali Gia Gallery, London (artist/curator)
Networking, P-House, Tokyo, Japan
1998 *A State of Affairs*, Arthur R. Rose, London
Cluster Bomb, Morrison-Judd Gallery, London
The Bible of Networking, Sali Gia Gallery, London
Souvenirs, curated by Above/Below, Museum Street, London
Absolut Secret, Royal College of Art, London

PUBLIC AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

Akxo Nobel, Holland
Cityside Development, London
Musée Romain Rolland, Clamecy, France
Tate Gallery Library, London
Victoria and Albert Museum Library, London
Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, Cumbria
Sothebys Institute of Art, London

PUBLIC ARTS PROJECTS

2005 Peckham Library, in association with MoCA, London, funded by Peckham Council, London
2000 High Street Redevelopment Project, Reading (shortlisted proposal)
Commission: Contemporary Art Society, London and Reading Borough Council
1999 Brick Lane, London
Commission: Cityside Development
St. Georges Cemetery Garden, Bloomsbury, London (unrealised commission)
Commission: Camden Council/Heritage Lottery Fund
1998 Museum Street, Bloomsbury, London
Commission: Above/Below

AWARDS, RESIDENCIES, FELLOWSHIPS

2005 Artist in Residence, Centre d'Art Contemporain
Parc Saint Leger, Pougues-les-Eaux, Burgundy, France
2004 British Council Travel Award (Japan)
Abbey Fellow in Painting, The British School in Rome
2002/03 Artist-in-Residence, The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, Cumbria
2000 Elephant Trust Grant
1998 London Arts Board Grant

UTOPIA PRESS (SIMON MORLEY) PUBLICATIONS

EXHIBITION CATALOGUES & ARTISTS BOOKS DESIGNED BY SIMON MORLEY

2007–8 *The English Series*, essay by Gabriel Coxhead, published in collaboration with Art First
2007 *A Short History of Dutch Painting (Part II)*, essays by Inke van Rijn and Simon Morley. published in collaboration with MetisNL
Simon Morley's Classic Japanese Movies, essays by Simon Pummell and Simon Morley,
published in collaboration with Taguchi Fine Art
2005 *Rossa*, essays by Omar Calabrese and Simon Morley, published in association with Galleria Spazia, Bologna
Reading Room, essays by Michael Petry, Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski. published in association with MOCA London
2004 *The Book Show*, essay by Simon Morley, published in association with The Nunnery, London
Post Card: Six Messages from the Twentieth Century, published in association with Percy Miller Gallery, London
A Short History of Japanese Fiction (in translation), essay by Jemima Montagu,
published in association with Taguchi Fine Art, Tokyo
2003 *The Unfortunate Tourist of Helvellyn and his Faithful Dog*, published in association with The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, Cumbria
Winner Northern Arts Catalogue Award, shortlisted for *The Art Newspaper* Catalogue of the Year Award
Elegy, with Jack Mapanje and Robert Woof, published in association with The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, Cumbria
2002 *Italian Holiday*, essays by Alain de Botton, Neal Brown, Chiara Guidi,
published in association with Zero arte contemporanea, Piacenza
1999 *Collected Works of George Orwell and other Paintings*, essays by Simon Morley, Neal Brown,
published in association with Percy Miller Gallery

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