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Exhibition spaces have a strange and beguiling quality. Situated in a real place and time, an exhibition is an invitation to be immersed in an imaginary world space, conjured up by the setting, the building (if there is one), the content of the exhibition itself, and the curator’s vision and design, all filtered through one’s own perceptions and preoccupations. Curators aim to create a sense of presence and connection to another place and time, not merely by displaying artifacts that belonged to a particular artist or a distinctive group but by raising a visceral and emotional fusion with the now through the deliberate evocation of a particular atmosphere.

Intrigued by the promise of the exhibition’s title, I boarded the MS Gustavberg to look for the Bloomsbury Spirit in the unlikely spaces of the Stockholm archipelago. Aboard the gleaming white decks of the MS Gustavberg, built in 1912 as a passenger and icebreaker steam ship, we chugged slowly through the narrow inlets and blue waterways of the islands of the archipelago. The sleek of dark wood fittings, shining brass rails, and well-worn wooden steps leading to the upper deck combined with sweet cakes, tea, and coffee served in china cups transported me to another era. The musical boom of the steam ship’s horn punctured the relative silence and added to my pleasure of being out on the water on a clear, cool but sunny morning. Wondering how Bloomsbury might transfer to Stockholm. I faced into the wind in an old canvas chair on the forward deck, wrapping my hands around a warm cup of coffee with little idea of what lay ahead. Could Bloomsbury be exported beyond a British or, more precisely, a London setting? I recalled the 2014 Virginia Woolf: Art, Life and Vision exhibition held at the National Portrait Gallery in London, the city in which Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group lived, worked, loved, and played. Frances Spalding, curator of that exhibition, described it as “a visual narrative akin to a portrait,” which traced Woolf’s emergence as radical author and her association with Bloomsbury (Spalding, Virginia Woolf 20). Could Bloomsbury, however we constitute it, come alive in the waters and woods of the Stockholm archipelago? Would this new setting change my perceptions of Bloomsbury? Interwoven with vistas of water, rock, and woodland, these and other musing occupied my mind on the slow boat time (approximately 90 minutes) to Artipelag, when I visited in late August 2018. Crossing the bay of Daggeberpfinden, we moored at a wooden dock, followed a spiral boardwalk through forest and rock, and climbed up towards an astonishing exhibition building of wood, glass, and high walls of converging and diverging angles. Located at Halludden and designed by Johan Nyberg, Artipelag surveys the expansive waters and distant horizons from the stony outcrop of Värmdo. Holding on to a feeling of anticipation for what Bloomsbury Spirit entailed a moment longer, I ate my sandwich outdoors in the sunshine, pure air, and forests of northern Europe.

Bloomsbury Spirit began as the visitor passed through a portal, separating the exhibition space from the time and place of the modern building. I stood in the Graffiti Gallery, with its walls of yellow and amber with lichen-green-grey wast-high wood paneling. Paintings by Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Henry Lamb paled with color and atmosphere, calling up each artist’s unique personality and deeply diverse interests in people, work, and place. Eighteen paintings filled the room, though a sense of spaciousness pervaded, pale white script on the floor identified the artist, date, and provenance of each work. Fry’s portrait painting, Clive Bell (1924) and his self-portrait (1930-1934) stand alongside his copy of Cézanne’s self-portrait (1925), each man’s gaze in the painting directed at both the artist and viewer inside the door of the recreated Grafton Gallery space. Henry Lamb’s monumental portrait Lytton Strachey (1914) dominates, partly due to size and scale but also the darkening paint. In the painting, Strachey is comfortably perched on a cane armchair covered with a rug and cushions, his long legs displaced and trailing across the floor, elbow resting on the chair arm, left hand clasping the right. His back is to a large window with a winter garden background in which two black-clocked figures walk, accompanied by a small white dog. I noticed Strachey’s red beard, gnarled eyebrows, spectacles, and a lost, unthought stare. A black, rolled umbrella and broad brimmed hat resting on a chair to the right completed the portrait. Despite its size, a sense of intimacy is conveyed in Lamb’s portrait of his eminent friend.

Nearby is Vanessa Bell’s affectionate portrait of Leonard (Leonard Woolf 1930) absorbed in writing a letter at his desk in Monk’s House. A spaniel is curled up asleep on a seat beside him. The dog’s ears spread, nose resting on paw, and dreaming repose catch my eye; it is an image within the painting suggesting trust. The fall of light and shade, the soft hues of Leonard’s suit and shirt, the intense red of the carnation on a nearby table invites the viewer to look more closely at this man, deeply engaged in his life’s work. Bell’s portrait of Leonard may be familiar to Woolf scholars and readers as a book cover but to sit and breathe in the texture and color of the art is the pleasure of an exhibition. Vanessa’s portrait of Leonard was completed for her sister the year before Virginia’s death (Spalding, Vanessa Bell 321). A Garden Scene (Bell 1925), Still Life with Coffee Pot (Fry 1915) and Essay in Abstract Design (Fry 1915) were also featured in the exhibition. Bloomsbury’s spirit was indeed on display and the combined effect of the art, subjects, and the tangible presence of the creative spirits in the room were almost overwhelming.

Portraits and artifacts were not confined to the Grafton Gallery; Bell’s Portrait of David Garnett (1915) lit up the green wall of a lightly emblished Charleston bathroom. The artworks were an intrinsic aspect of the separate room installations, with deliberately arranged and designed interiors sequenced to build the mesmerizing and otherworldly atmosphere of the exhibition. Freed from the traditional museum practice of presenting objects in glass cases, artifacts and paintings were placed within the environment in which they were created. The absence of an exhibition catalogue for the artwork was initially puzzling but began to make sense as I visited each installation. Bloomsbury Spirit comprised eight distinctive spaces: the Grafton Galleries, the Cadena Cafe, Omega Workshops, Charleston, The Ballet Russes and India, Carrington and Strachey at Ham Spray, the Hogarth Press and Garsington, circumnavigated by a wide pale corridor with information panels. There, luminous, translucent installation style paintings by Karen Gabel Madsen transported visitors from the reading room in the British Library or King’s Cross Station to the lush gardens reminiscent of those at Charleston or Monk’s House. The painting of the Southouse Bridge at the River Ouse summoned more somber thoughts. Madsen states that she was inspired by the free and wild ways of the Bloomsbury Group.


2 See the cover illustration of Leonard Woolf. A Life by Victoria Glendinning.

3 Duncan Grant painted a group of male nudes on the verso of Bell’s Still Life Beach.
their clear idealism that placed more value on “friendship, the honest profound conversation and sexual openness” over money and careers (Andersson 30).

The Omega Workshops and Cadena Café were inspired by Fry’s Omega chairs and by Grant’s lily pond tables, the latter of which were a popular Omega product. Judith Collins states that Fry advised Grant to “take the pots and pour some colour straight onto the table top so that lilies, leaves, goldfish and water all become random pools of colour” (Collins qtd in Shone, The Art of Bloomsbury 141). Shone considers it “one of Grant’s most spectacular inventions and prepares the marbling technique he later developed” (141). The Cadena Café pays homage to Grant’s distinctive design and creative work but is a clearly cooperative and unreserved excitement of working with other artists producing designs for pottery, furniture, textiles, wall screens, printed fabrics, carpets, and wall paper. Contemporary artist Tor von Geijer recreated the large paper border from a black and white reproduction, accentuating details and colors. Pink, yellow, brown, and gray were splattered above grey wood paneling and head high photographs of Bloomsbury from the Houghton Library collection. For von Geijer, the appeal of the Bloomsbury Group is in “their artistic candour (a lot of flowers), immaturity and desire for beauty” (Andersson 31). I sat on a red lacquered cane Omega chair with a Byzantine wooden circle headrest and broadened the books scattered across the decorated table while imagining café society encounters and conversations. Omega-inspired floor rugs added a sense of invitation for visitors to sit. I leaned through recent editions of Fry’s 1920 Vision and Design, Aldous Huxley’s 1921 Crome Yellow, and Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1912, 1921), as well contemporary Bloomsbury literature such as The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club (2016) by S. P. Rosenthall and James Harle, Lilith Larsson’s Promenade in Virginia Woolf’s London (2014), Frances Spalding’s biography of Duncan Grant (1997), The Art of Dora Carrington (1994) by Jane Hill, and Queer Bloomsbury (2016), edited by Brenda Holt and Madelina Dottof. An abundance of items were displayed in the Omega Workshops, some placed on a podium and others illuminated by exceptional lighting, contrasting light and dark, creating spaces between the swirling patterned environment. The Omega signboard by Grant (1913) hung high above a doorway. One of the most alluring compositions in the Omega room was created by a dark wood wardrobe, with painted white drawers on large red discs in a pale and dark green verdant background, accompanied by a water-lily table (Grant 1913) and slightly worn, leather Omega chair, with colorful cross-stitch work of russet red blooms and leaves in a pot. On the wall behind was Fry’s 1914 design scheme for the Café. The Omega workshop artists—commissioned for their eclectic and vibrant mix of fabrics, furnishings, objects, and mural paintings—transferred their art to walls, ceilings, and floors as depicted in this corner of the exhibition. The legacy of Bloomsbury art and literature was tangible in this contemplative space that offered a glimpse as to what might have motivated and inspired these unapologetic and courageous companions.

I opened the gate into Charleston, framed by a low red brick wall overlooking a sunlit garden. Here a minimalist placement of plants, a cushioned wooden bench, and two deckchairs welcomed visitors. The walls of the garden reflected bright light and sunshine yellow. Rooms opened up and out into the garden—one of which was a sitting room with grey-shaded coach-shell patterned wallpaper and comfortable armchairs draped with printed linen fabrics after 1930s designs by Fry, Grant, and Bell. A yellow and blue lamp lit a painted side table. A fireplace, resplendent with a painted over mantel of voluptuously draped women holding an oval mirror with an inset painting of a basket of flowers, was reminiscent of Duncan Grant’s 1928 design at Charleston. To one side of the fireplace, hung Grant’s portrait of John Maynard Keynes (1918), a writing board on knee, his brow creased in thought. On the far wall, The Pond (Bell 1915) was at home in this installation. It is Bell’s first artwork of the pond described by Shone as a “perfectly organized painting” that captures the “remote tranquility” (Shone, The Art of Bloomsbury 185) of Charleston, a place (and mood) that Bell cherished throughout her life. The other room was the sitting room, “with its French windows opening onto the walled garden and its window looking out to the pond and across the fields to Tiltons” (Shone, “Official Guide” 63). Portraits were painted, secrets revealed, manuscripts shared, and the meaning of poetry explored in that room; Lytton Strachey read aloud from Eminent Victorians (1913) and here too T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) was appraised by Desmond MacCarthy (Shone, The Art of Bloomsbury 63). Vanessa’s portrait of her baby son collared by soft linens, Julian Avake (1908), added a sense of domestic intimacy to the room.


Across the garden in the artists studio, two self-portraits commanded my attention. I made contact with Grant’s otherworldly grey-blue eyes in both of his youthful self-portraits, one displayed on an easel (1910) and the other, Self Portraitt in a Turban (1909-1910) hung on the blue painted wall. Brushes were gathered in a tin on a window ledge and tall stools waited for the artist. But, of course, the artists were not there and the studio was pristine. There were no paint splattered clothes or the lingering smell of incense. This was not an attempt to reproduce the rooms of Charleston. The importance given to the exhibition was strangely effective in conjuring up my sense of the artists and writers who worked or lived in Sussex and London. Nearby, a nude by von Geijer swam on the long side of the tub in the green bathroom but it was in the kitchen installation that the distinctive note of the exhibition, the emotion of colour, began to unfurl. A mellow pink and cream light glazed over lime and grey storage cupboards. A blue-and-white willow-pattern plate of yellow lemons stood on a plainly painted and muted dresser. A highly colored jug of wine and a bowl of fruit are painted onto two cupboard doors, framed and hung high on the wall; Duncan painted these for the Charleston kitchen (1918). A wide cream stove, its vast chimney decorated with bisque blue and white willow pattern plates, was the center of the installation. Chinese plates were transported from Hyde Park Gate, the Stephen family home, to Bloomsbury and later placed in Charleston (Shone, “Official Guide” 44). Four Omega chairs surround a wooden dining table set with white tin-glazed earthenware, the scene lit by a rose pink, ceramic, and lead style 1940s lampshade, as potted by Quentin Bell. Decorated by Grant, Quentin’s glazed ceramic mugs and pots were placed on low shelves. Two paintings complete the scene: Grant’s Still Life with Teapot (1929) and Vanessa’s gift to Duncan, Still Life, Polyanthus in Vase (c1930). The kitchen space was large, uncluttered, sparse, and yet warm. There was

4 See also Shone’s catalogue Duncan Grant Designer for the Liverpool 1980 exhibition.
5 See also Larsson’s Walking Virginia Woolf’s London: An Investigation in Literary Geography.
potency in the iridescent lighting, suggesting that here anything might happen. For Angelica Garnett, Charleston offered a place of “solace and protection: as a retreat combining an enjoyment of life with the act of creation” (Garnett, “The Earthly Paradise” 103); it was also where she too became absorbed by the benignity of color, learned from her parents, Vanessa and Duncan. She writes that in Charleston.

I was surrounded by colors, shapes and textures which constituted my first languages. […] Indigo red, black, prussian blue, lemon yellow and raw umber sang their own songs from wall to wall, qualifying the spaces of grey or white between. Each color or combinations of color became associated with a different texture or mood. (Garnett 107).

The opalescent quality of the color scheme of each installation combined with a distinctive lighting scheme to perform alchemical work, merging there and here, then and now.

Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes performance of Le Dieu Bleu was the inspiration for artist Ernst Billgren. The 12 x 4 meter scenic painting was set off against the sumptuous Léon Bakst-designed costumes. It’s worth noting that Leonard observed that:

The Russian Ballet became for a time a curious centre for fashionable and intellectual London. It was the great days of Diaghilev with Nijinsky at the height of his powers in the classical ballets. I have never seen anything more perfect, nor more exciting, on any stage than Schererezade, Caraval, Lac des Cygnes. […] One’s pleasure was increased because night after night one could go to Covent Garden and find all round one’s one’s friends, the people whom one liked best in the world, moved and exalted as one was oneself. (L. Woolf 40-49).

Ottoline Morrell was patron of the ballet for a time, and the peregrine dancer Lydia Lopokova became a popular favorite of the British public, many of whom who could now attend the ballet by virtue of lower-priced seating. Lydia and Maynard Keynes would confound his Bloomsbury acquaintances by their apparent incongruity while creating a successful, if unconventional, marriage. The inclusion of the extravagant costumes of the Ballet Russe and an Indian scenography provoked such creative dissonance, as did Grant’s oval-shaped portrait of Lydia in a red dress (cf1940s).

For artist Peter Kohler, the Hann Spray space was an opportunity to explore Doris Carrington and Lytton Strachey’s creativity and attitude to painting. He admired “their positivism and a strong sense of freedom” (Andersson 31). Kohler’s mantra of “joy-in-the-making” infused the colorful hearth, painted with a frieze of animals, human figures, images, plants, furniture, and abstract forms against a pink background, above which shimmered a mirror like painting of sky and sand, merging into a leaf green, golden yellow, and ochre frame. A framed pencil sketch of Carrington (Gentill 1911) above the mantelpiece observed the visitors who sat and watched the film Carrington (Dir. Christopher Hampton 1995). A small mixed media with silver foil, Iris Tree on a Horse (Carrington c. 1920), cantered across the wall. Carrington’s affectionate painting (1916) of Lytton, wrapped in a red and green paisley shawl with his elongated fingers on the marbled spine of a book, is the signature piece of this space. Framed by light, the blue-green painting glowed against a lavender-framed background. Lytton’s portrait established Carrington as a unique and distinctive artist. She had painted the person she loved and felt the most confidence in herself when she was finished (Hill 32). Hann Spray, a home created by Carrington and Lytton became “a complete way of life, a haven and refuge, a place of work and festivity, a place of rest but also a place of inspiration” (Hill 91). Like other visitors, I too wanted to stay in this serene, enticing room but there was a sense of subtext.

The lure of books drew me into an adjoining room and the next installation where classic, first, rare and early editions of Hogarth Press publications, nested in book-saved sleeves, arranged along the length of one wall, were individually lit and displayed as if they were art-works, which instead they were. Titles by Virginia Woolf included Two Stories (1917), Mrs. Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927), The Waves (1931), The Years (1937), Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Brown (1922), The Common Reader (1925) as well as T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1923). The warm tones and designs of the covers by Bell were highlighted in this display. In featuring the early publications only, some indication of the future life of the prodigious, professional, and world-renowned Hogarth Press would have been welcome—particularly for those books published in translation, given the non-English speaking setting. I walked around a platen press printer, lit from above and positioned on a dias in the center of the room. A wooden walking stick floated in the dark space above, only noticeable when I looked up. An ink-smudged handprint on the floor reminded me of one of Virginia’s best-known letters to Vanessa, 26 April 1917, on their new publishing venture.

Our press arrived on Tuesday. We unpacked it with enormous excitement […] One has great blocks of type, which have to be divided into their separate letters, and fonts, and then put into the right partitions […] We get so absorbed we can’t stop, I see that real printing will devour one’s entire life. (L2 150).

In a letter to Violet Dickenson written in May 1917, Woolf writes of the pleasure of complete absorption in creating books: “We’ve just stopped printing after 3 hours—it is so fascinating that we can hardly bear to stop […] We both so much enjoyed it, and you should be made to lend a hand” (Letters 2 155). The exhibition concluded with the salon at Carrington, filled with flowers, a piano, a sense of Ottoline’s glamour and grace, and the aura of those who basked in her convivial atmosphere. Biographies of Ottoline as well as her own memoirs recall the spirit of a time in which friendship was the pivot of life. 4 This spirit was gently evoked throughout the exhibition.

A special issue of Antipode (Sommar 2018) features the exhibition Bloomsbury Spirit, with text by Mathias Dahlstrom. There are short biographies of Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Doris Carrington, Duncan Grant, John Maynard Keynes, Vanessa Bell, and Clive Bell, as well as the Omega Workshops and the Hogarth Press, interspersed with photographs of these familiars, their gardens and interior spaces, and their works. An explanatory exhibition

guide, *Bloomsbury Spirit* is available in English, edited by Freda Anderson. It too features fourteen biographies including Vita Sackville-West, Ottoline Morrell, Lydia Lopokova, and Bertrand Russell. A 1931 photograph of an elegant Woolf in her Rodinian garden graces the cover of the exhibition guide, surrounded by a version of that now-familiar epigram composed of squares, circles, and triangles. Vera Neverow (VPM 91) and Stuart Clarke (*Virginia Woolf* Bulletin) identified the historical novelist, Margaret Irwin, as the source of the phrase that described the Bloomsbury Group as living in squares and loving in triangles. The *Artipelag* version of the shibboleth reads “They lived in circles. They painted in squares. They loved in triangles.” The adage is further reflected in a nicely executed but puzzling full-page illustration of reputed Bloomsbury relationships in *Artipelag* (Sommerman 2018). The finely drawn portraits are connected by lines of relationship, identified as “gefs” (married), “sex” (sexual relationship), “deep vaeskap” (deep friendship) and “muslyckafer” (unsuccessful courtship). Converting the complexity of what were dynamic and changing relationships into a two-dimensional depiction is of course a fraught exercise. A line of sexual relationship between Virginia Woolf and Ottoline Morrell is drawn; their correspondence can be teasing, affectionate, and honest but was it “sexual” in the narrow, conventional sense? The *Artipelag* illustration seems to me to be more expressive of Ottoline’s attraction for the sensual, the colour and texture of another person’s life. Ottoline’s allure and dazzle of her sensory powers are evocatively recalled in Woolf’s memoir sketch “Old Bloomsbury.” Here Woolf asked that her “excitement be excused, as she described the effect of Ottoline

bearing down upon one from afar in her white shawl with great scarlet flowers on it and sweeping one away [. . .] into a little room with her alone, where she plied one with questions that were so intimate and intense, about one’s life and one’s friends and made one sign one’s name in a little scented book—I think my excitement may be excused. (170)

Ingela Lind recalls the goals of Bloomsbury, “freedom, enlightenment, the utopia of the playful human and the civilized society” (Anderson 29). The exhibition takes its buoyancy and creative lift from Lind’s book, *In sig friet—Bloomsburygrupperna, Indem och konsten att leva* (Take Liberty—The Bloomsbury Group, India and the Art of Living). In her essay on the political significance of Bloomsbury, Lind identifies her motivation in curating this exhibition. For her, *Bloomsbury Spirit* represents a group of people who “broke free from majority thinking” and provide an ideological counterpart to “the loathing of complexity” and manipulation of representative democracy in our own time (Anderson 29). As I took my leave, I felt the collective effervescence of Bloomsbury that comes through when the ideas, paintings, and writings of each associated individual are given room to breathe and circulate. Apart from brief visits by Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf, I am not aware of how many of the Bloomsbury Group visited Sweden or were familiar with Swedish artists, musicians, writers, designers, or maternal culture. On a tour of relatives in Sweden and Denmark, shortly after his return from Ceylon, Leonard and his brother Edgar visited in July 1911. Swimming, talking, eating, joking, and sleeping on tiny islands, the “sky and sea were bright blue; the sun best down on them” in this marvelous eternal summer and he was “completely happy” (L. Woolf 44). For Leonard, the Swedish people were more civilized than other Europeans and were “advanced in everything,” including bathing in their skin (44). Leonard writes that “their civilization was their own. It was a little too self-conscious, too antisepctic and sterilized for my own taste, but it was refreshingly alive and vigorous” (45).

*Bloomsbury Spirit* was a distinctive exhibition like no other I have visited, replete with sensory and visual experiences that prioritized accomplishment, creative work, a lightness of being, freedom, and aliveness while enduring grief and the hardships of war. In this centenary of World War I, Leonard’s observation of the world before 1914 is of a time when there was a “growing belief that it was a supremely

good thing for people to be communally and individually happy” (44). *Bloomsbury Spirit* evoked friendship, happiness, and meaningful work energized by art, culture, and politics. When the pursuit of truth and knowledge remains a most urgent concern, the resilience of those Bloomsbury ideals continues to resonate. Not quite like a fairy tale but I left knowing that somehow I was enchanted by my visit, a feeling that lingered for some time.

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*Works Cited*


