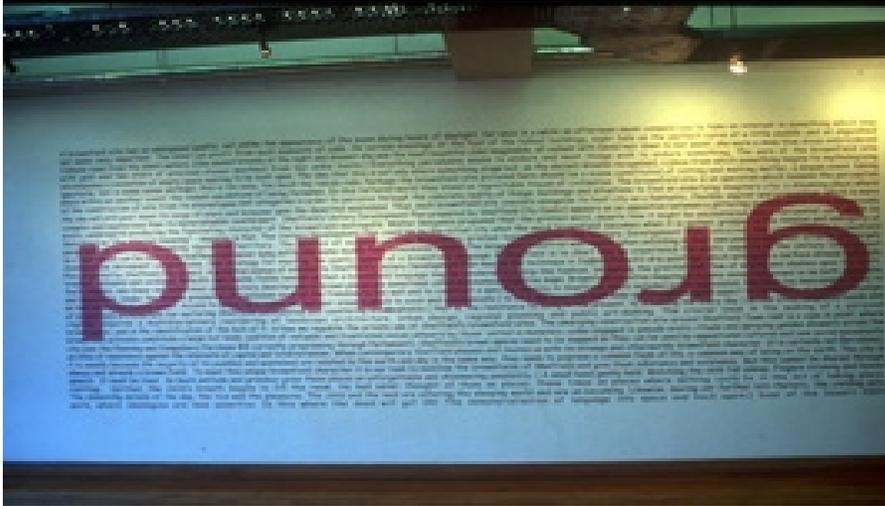


Brownfield, Art Sheffield 03, 2003

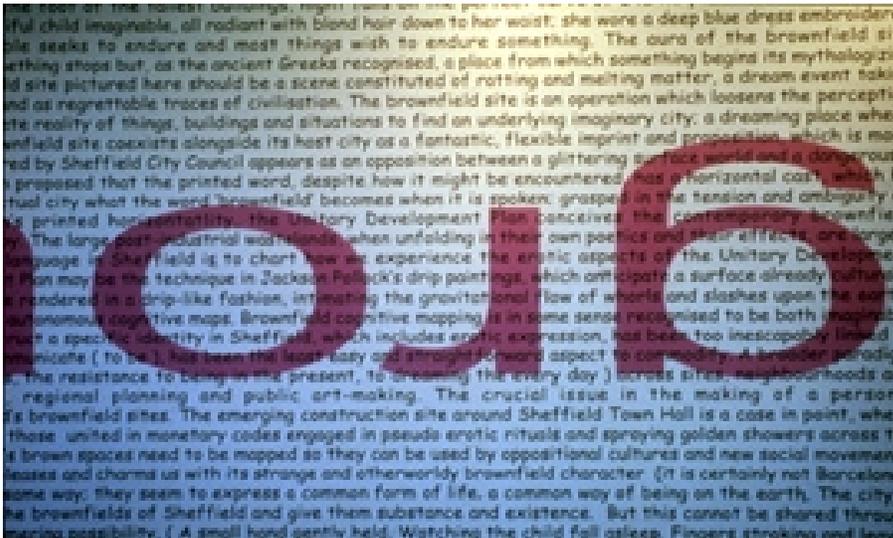
by Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells,



Brownfield, Workstation, Sheffield, Art Sheffield 03, 2003

A brownfield site has an ambiguous quality, not unlike the appearance of the moon during hours of daylight. For once in a while an afternoon moon compels you to take an interest in something that may not seem very important. The mind can profit from such moments of calm. On certain evenings, at the foot of the tallest buildings, night falls on the perfect curve of a little puddle and an anguished fullness rises from the silent waters. (She smiled bravely at the night and dreamt she was the most beautiful child imaginable, all radiant with blond hair down to her waist; she wore a deep blue dress embroidered with gold, and two stars of precious stones sparkled from her ankle boots.) Everything perishable seeks to endure, and most things wish to endure something. The aura of the brownfield site encompasses a sensation of empty space waiting to be built upon. The idea that this is not only where something stops but, as the ancient Greeks recognised, a place from which something begins its mythologizing spectacle. Yet in some sense perhaps this is too easy, too much the tabula rasa. Perhaps the brownfield site pictured here should be a scene constituted of rotting and melting matter, a dream event taking place within an another event; the violent oscillations of being forsaken. In this tortured world they stand as regrettable traces of civilisation. The brownfield site is an operation which loosens the perception of the construction of site from its stereotypes and categories in order to perceive through the concrete reality of things, buildings and situations to find an underlying imaginary city; a dreaming place where the sky will still pour down its cargo of stars and breezes upon the deserted

wasteland. Thus, each brownfield site coexists alongside its host city as a fantastic flexible imprint and proposition, which is more complex and mysterious than its materialisable counterpart. Sheffield's Unitary Development Plan prepared by Sheffield City Council appears as an opposition between a glittering surface world and a dangerously erotic underworld producing the fascinating character of the brownfield-metropolis. Walter Benjamin proposed that the printed word, despite how it might be encountered, has a horizontal cast, which he described as "the internal meaning" – meaning is flat. The Unitary Development Plan could be to the actual city what the word 'brownfield' becomes when it is spoken; grasped in the tension and ambiguity of geographical territory becoming rhetorical territory. The erotics of suspension. Like Benjamin's printed horizontality, the Unitary Development Plan conceives the contemporary brownfield as a text, which can be read in various ways but never sung softly like some muddy four dimensional lullaby. The large post-industrial wastelands, when unfolding in their own poetics and their effects are largely dismissed as delinquent compositions. One strategy for meeting the poetic appeal of a brownfield language in Sheffield is to chart how we experience the erotic aspects of the Unitary Development Plan prepared by Sheffield City Council. A potential avenue of interest to Sheffield's Unitary Development Plan may be the technique of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, which anticipate a surface already culturally 'trashed', debased and oxidised. Pollock's own muddy fields remind us that a brownfield language may be rendered in a drip-like fashion, intimating the gravitational flow of whorls and slashes upon the earth. Such complex, non-linear and sometimes contradictory descriptions of brown places are sometimes called autonomous cognitive maps. Brownfield cognitive mapping is in some sense recognised to be both imaginable and impossible. Under the intense pressures of capitalism, most of the freedom to live well and to construct a specific identity in Sheffield, which includes erotic expression, has been too inescapably linked to an individual's purchasing power. Access to space, as in indoor and outdoor areas in which to exist and communicate (to be), has been the least easy and straightforward aspect to commodify. A broader paradigm of brownfield architecture for nurturing Sheffield communities and countering brownphobia (that is, the resistance to being in the present, to dreaming the every day) across sites, neighbourhoods and regions requires a multidisciplinary reordering of landscape architecture, urban design, regional planning and public art-making. The crucial issue in the making of a personal brown space, and in the identification of the lack of it, is how we regulate the private use of Sheffield's brownfield sites.



Brownfield, (detail), vinyl wall-text piece, Art Sheffield 03

The emerging construction site around Sheffield Town Hall is a case in point, where brownfield activists constitute a large but loose coalition of refusals and frustrated voices, unheard by those united in monetary codes engaged in pseudo erotic rituals and spraying golden showers across the city (see the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill currently progressing through Parliament). Sheffield's brown spaces need to be mapped so they can be used by oppositional cultures and new social movements as sites of resistance against the interests of capital and totalitarianism. When contemporary Sheffield pleases and charms us with its strange and otherworldly brownfield character (it is certainly not Barcelona), it is usually because the majority of its puddles and wasteland are related to the earth and sky in the same way; they seem to express a common form of life, a common way of being on the earth. The city is always and already a brown-field. To meet this unique brownfield character it is our task to mobilise the brownfields of Sheffield and give them substance and existence. But this cannot be shared through speech. It must be lived. So much solitude and grandeur gives these places an unforgettable and shimmering possibility. (A small hand gently held. Watching the child fall asleep. Fingers stroking and leaves rustling. Settled, the child's breath begins to fill the room. He had never thought of them as places; these times as places where nothing could be in the act of taking place. The dissolving details of the day, the tics and the pleasures. The child and the land are entering the sleeping world and are un-becoming. Likewise, moving yet further into rhetoric, the yielding unto work, where ideologies are less assertive. Is this where the dead will go? Oh blood and sand! Sons of the Desert 2003.

