

BRENDAN EARLEY
GHOSTS OF THE FUTURE

SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2009





I Wanted To Start Again Part 2 Site-specific cut-out stud wall, plywood, plasterboard, styrofoam and wheels Dimensions variable 2009

HAUNTED HOUSES

In Brendan Earley's work *9 Reports*, an old-fashioned, near-obsolete monitor displays a representation of an infinite expanse of outer space. The viewer is apparently hurtled forward, at high speed, revealing only a repeating pattern, an aimless trajectory. A disembodied voice recites a series of missives sent by an expeditionary crew from an abandoned, apparently never-ending space station. As the commentary proceeds, their exploration of the site reveals a limitless circuit of corridors, mezzanines, way-stations and elevator shafts, curving imperceptibly outwards. The narrator speaks: "Somewhere in the station there may well be populated enclaves, even entire cities, surrounded by empty passenger decks that stretch on forever like free space. Perhaps there are nation-states whose civilisations rose and declined as their peoples paused in the endless migrations across the station."¹

A second room reveals a larger gallery space housing indeterminate objects constructed from everyday materials. A series of rectangular cuttings from a false wall, ragged and irregular along their edges, have been reassembled into a crudely cubic sculpture. The structure is open on one end, exposing hollow pockets in the interior. Angular, miniature assemblages of Styrofoam and plasterboard occupy the floor of the space, while metallic relief sculptures are positioned on the walls, their apertures gaping open like strangely humanoid orifices. A single drawing portrays concentric rows of ink strokes, increasingly darkening as they extend to the bottom of the page. There are other drawings too; architectural spaces, ripples in water, deserted landscapes.

Here, a depiction of a single bunker, lost in the ever-expanding desert, there, household paraphernalia transmogrified into alien artefacts, space-junk, the debris of a remote mission. We know and do not know these objects. Earley's delicate ink drawings of monuments and earthworks record seminal artworks of modernist figures such as Robert Smithson, Donald Judd and Michael Heizer, and illuminate their attendant preoccupation with notions of (im)permanence, transformation, and communication across voids of time and space. These monuments are built to last, to convey something of our present period to later observers, even as they, inevitably, become susceptible to misinterpretation and re-contextualisation. After all, it's impossible to know how such objects will be deciphered once they're out of our hands. However, Earley also acknowledges the reverse situation, that predictions of the future, of space exploration and technological innovation, will always carry traces of the present day. One is reminded of Stanley Kubrick's film version of Arthur C. Clarke's novel *2001*, where, side-by-side with visionary representations of the then-distant millennium, astronauts relax in 1960s-style lounges, being served martinis by mini-skirted stewardesses. Even in science fiction, the possibilities of the future are shaped by the realities of the present.

Despite a palpable atmosphere of unease and alienation, and the audibility of *9 Reports* throughout the gallery, the exhibition cannot be said to simply illustrate that text; a short story by J.G. Ballard called 'Report on an Unidentified Space Station', as read by Brian O'Doherty. Although Earley's forms and images possess a certain otherworldly quality, such connotations are offset by the utilitarian familiarity of the materials. It is in this dialectical overlap that the works reside. While his sculptural installations reveal their interior structures – the supporting frames and joints – this gesture is undercut by an inherent artifice. *Too Many Worries*, the aforementioned relief work, resembles one of those Styrofoam inserts, placed in boxes to keep the contents secure during transport. Their purpose is merely to fill

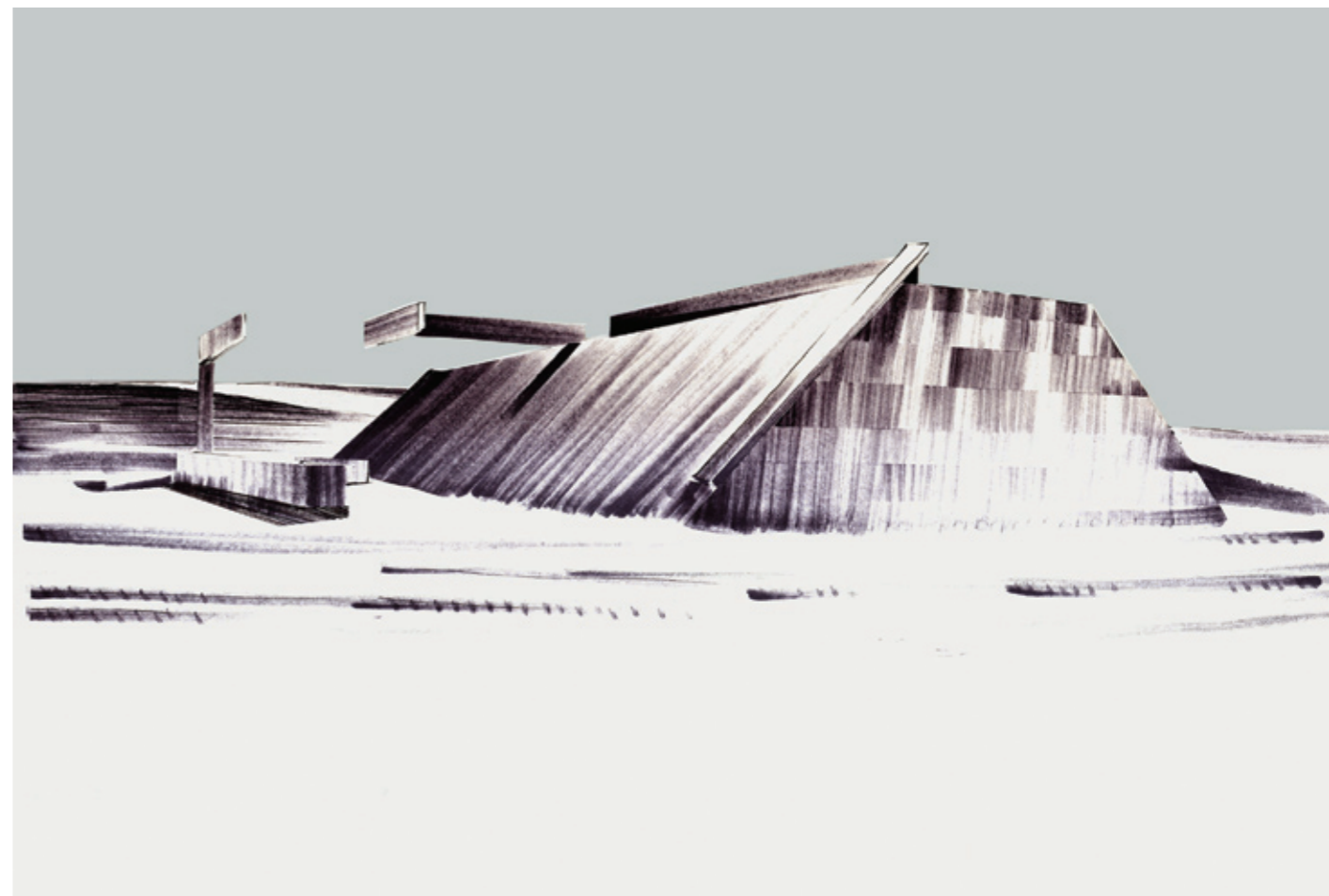
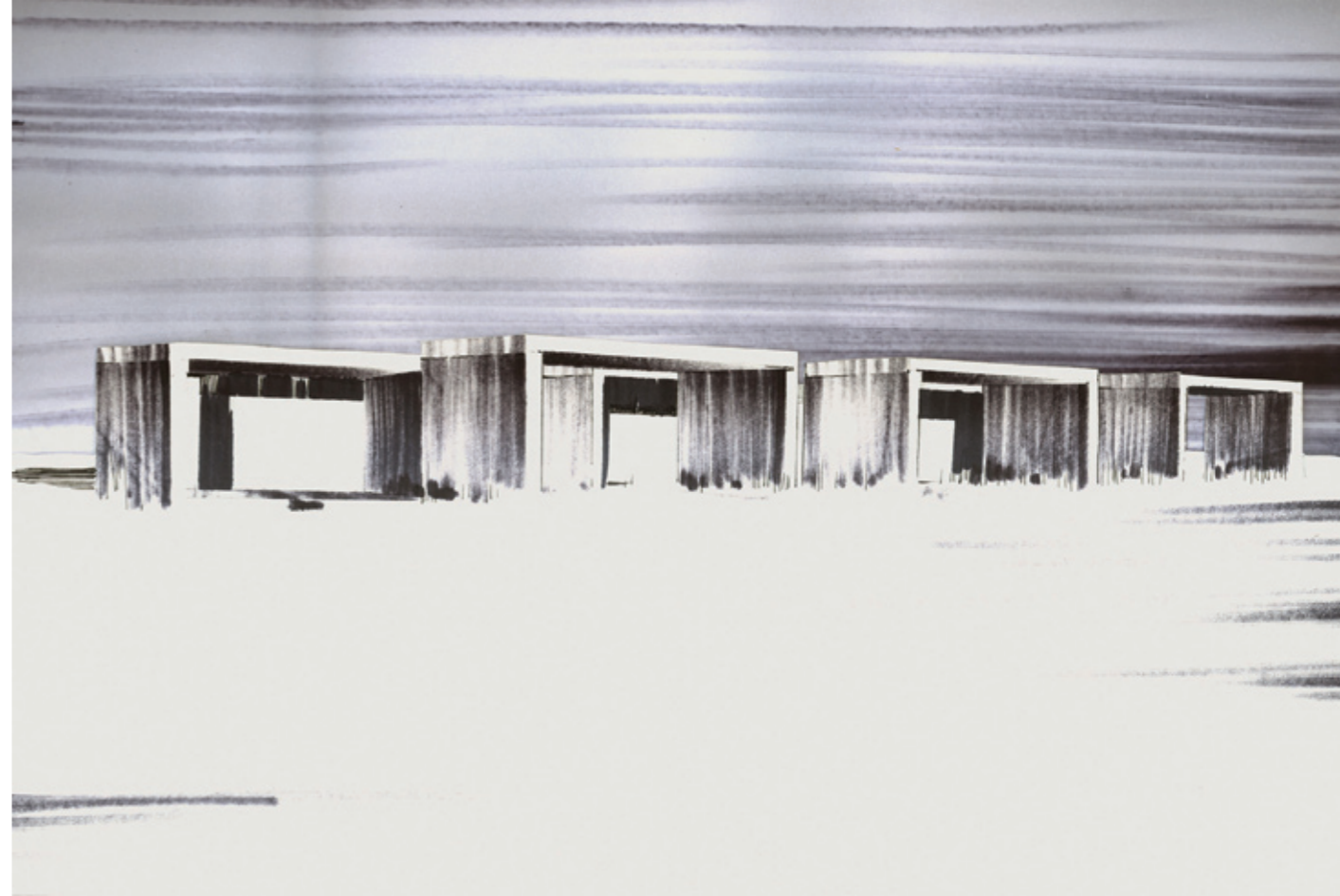




I Wanted To Start Again Part 2 (detail) Site-specific cut-out stud wall, plywood, plasterboard, styrofoam and wheels Dimensions variable 2009

Marfa, Texas 2, 3/4/09 Black marker on paper 35 x 44 cm 2009

Garden Valley, Nevada 2 Black marker on paper 35 x 44 cm 2009





in the negative space of the container and render the essential components immobile. Here, however, the throwaway object has been cast in aluminium, separated from its initial rationale and elevated to a position on the gallery wall. It appears face-like, grinning and pock-marked. Similarly, the pair of smaller sculptures, *Unreported Artefact I* and *II*, in spite of their physical and literal proximity to Ballard's story, remind one of modular components of a larger, indiscernible structure. They wear their bolts and fittings inside-out, as if intended to somehow slot together, and in the absence of a supporting framework or function, appear fragmentary and isolated. In re-working bits and pieces commonly associated with packaging, distribution and containment (and Earley goes so far here as to treat the space of the gallery as yet another container), the practical item is made aesthetic, while, conversely, unidentifiable and obscure forms are left to reveal the prosaic origins of their own materials.

The everyday was once strange and new as well. Earley's works peel back the layers of normality, accrued through exposure and in increments, to show the object as-it-really-was, as the past's premonition of the future now, made manifest. In the retro-high-tech U-matic monitor and the archaic, oddly nostalgic, screensaver display, in the fake-panelling, faux-metallic sheen of inscrutable household furnishings, in the revelation of bare materials (which, even revealed, are man-made and composite); the entirety of the exhibition indicates a pre-post-modern sensibility, a dated outlook which saw the future as an 'other' possibility, never aware that it was, even then, already stealthily encroaching on the present. In this light, one can return to Ballard and, specifically, Jean Baudrillard's reading of him, finding in the author's vision of science-fiction the end of science-fiction. '[When] there is no longer any virgin territory, and thus one available to the imaginary, when the map covers the whole territory, something like the principle of reality disappears [Baudrillard's italics]. In this way, the conquest of space constitutes an irreversible crossing toward the loss of the terrestrial referential...'²

If the imaginary permeates reality to such a degree that one can no longer differentiate between the present and the future, then Earley's practice locates a parallel process in notions of art and the everyday. This tendency is perhaps most perfectly realised in a previous work, wherein a sculpture assembled out of an IKEA flat-pack kitchen was, after its exhibition, disassembled and passed on (as a kitchen) to an unwitting recipient³. In such gestures, Earley acknowledges the malleability of the object's meaning, as well as its form, and the role of the artist (and gallery) in conferring artistic value. Just as the work acquires a certain legibility through its arrangement - the way that Earley's drawing *Chart of a Space no. 2*, with its gradual accumulation of density through the layering of ink strokes, seems to illustrate the narrator's progression into the unknown in *9 Reports*, or how the cut-away sections of the wall in *I Wanted to Start Again* are reconfigured in the work's sculptural component - this cohesiveness can just as easily be broken apart, disassembled and rearranged. The latter work in particular, apparently intervening in the physical architecture of the building only to reveal a secondary (and superfluous) facade laid flush against the supporting wall, takes on new implications in the audible presence of Brian O'Doherty and his own investigations into the gallery as a framing device. Earley's gesture can thus be interpreted, in accordance with O'Doherty, as a critique of the permanent, the pristine and immutable; 'the wall becomes a membrane through which aesthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange.'⁴ It is through such a membrane that O'Doherty (in his own words, not Ballard's) infiltrates the gallery, as an aside or a digression.

The works here are, at-once, items of a long-lost past and an undisclosed future, a possible use-value measured against a latent art-value. The exhibition momentarily suspends a range of disparate points of reference, quotation and allusion; 1982 (the year of Ballard's original text), 2009, an undetermined future-

Chart of a Space No. 2 Black marker on paper 260 x 150 cm 2009

Unreported Artefact Styrofoam, plasterboard and plywood 45 x 32 x 28 cm 2009

Unreported Artefact 2 Styrofoam, plasterboard and plywood 28 x 54 x 54 cm 2009



tense, Ballard / Baudrillard, O'Doherty and the American modernist artists whose work not only informs Earley's content but his methodology, Borges (whose notion of the 1:1 ratio map influences Baudrillard's simulation), etc. These names haunt the works, speaking out of 'dead' technologies and distant contexts, temporarily summoned, within the gallery space, before dissipating in their separate and infinite curvilinear trajectories. Things can never be what they were. And yet, like Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, the work which is submerged and then revealed after long periods of time, the future re-interpretation of a past artwork might simply re-appear, transformed in a new light.

Chris Clarke

¹ J.G. Ballard, *Report on an Unidentified Space Station*, 1982 (London: Harper Perennial, 2006)

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 123-124

³ This gesture recalls one of the many footnotes (and footnotes to footnotes) in David Foster Wallace's sprawling novel *Infinite Jest*, wherein the son of the late optics expert / tennis academy founder / filmmaker James Orin Incandenza explains the concept of 'Found Drama' developed by his father. An elaborate art hoax, the notion used random, unwitting civilians as subject matter for unrealised cinéma vérité documentaries, even as the subjects remained oblivious to their participation.³

³This was the joke. All it was was you and a couple cronies (...) got out a metro Boston phone book and tore a White Pages page out at random and thumbtacked it to the wall and then (...) throw a dart at it from across the room. At the page. And the name it hit becomes the subject of the Found Drama. And whatever happens to the protagonist with the name you hit with the dart for like the next hour and a half is the Drama (...) And the protagonist doesn't know he's the protagonist in a Found Drama because in Reality nobody thinks they're in any sort of Drama', David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, (London: Abacus, 1996), p. 1027-28

⁴ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986) p. 79

