



THE QUARRY RESEMBLED THE MOON

Brian Dillon

But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself among the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe.

W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995)

The work of Brendan Earley corrals some of the most resonant artistic and cinematic reference points of the twentieth century into a practice that is by no means telegraphic or otherwise literal-minded in its deployment of such touchstones, but instead sublimes them into the artist's own alchemical adventure with abject and precious materials, urban and exurban ruins, the remnants and potential reanimations of Modernism and its aftermaths. Among the figures who comprise this constellation are (in roughly chronological order) Le Corbusier, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris and Andrei Tarkovsky. They appear, one might say, as especially insistent coordinates for many artists of the past decade or so. A particular conjunction of the legacies of Modernism, Land Art and Minimalism conspires in our present moment with a more melancholy filmic inheritance to produce, as it were, a map of the degradation of past architectural and artistic movements, projected in Earley's case onto more localized and pressing concerns. But it is still relatively uncommon to find this perplex of interests addressed in a way that eschews narrative, homage or frankly nostalgic footstepping of the artist's avowed precursors, essaying in place of those familiar strategies a labour of meticulous making, an exploration of ambiguous materials, lines, surfaces and forms. Earley's sculptures and drawings constitute an intervention into apparently familiar territory that is at once oblique and immersive.

Consider his attachment to the work of Tarkovsky, and especially to the director's 1979 film *Stalker*. The enigmatic ruin-guide of the film's title appears in a number of Earley's drawings, slumped in a reverie inside the wreckage of the Zone: the mysterious landscape that promises – and may well deliver: the outcome is unclear – a quasi-mystical fulfilment of the protagonists' deepest desires. The *Stalker* lies sodden and dreaming among unlikely and sometimes obscure detritus: he turns his gaze away from the surrounding military and industrial ruins, and towards a less legible stratum of organic and inorganic decay. In this desolate fugue state, he is attended by a stray dog: the image was used for the film's poster in 1979, and in Earley's drawing *Lying Awake in an Empty Building* is reduced to a sort of ragged schematism – it's instantly recognizable but also of a piece with other instances in these drawings of lone and somewhat wryly romanticized artist-explorers: Smithson filmed from above as he reaches the terminal point of his *Spiral Jetty*, Morris obscurely got up as an occultish figure from a Black Sabbath album cover.

There is a level of properly Romantic wandering involved here, a motif of the artist as lone figure in a ruinous landscape, to which Earley, who says that walking is a crucial part of his quotidian practice, is hardly immune. Such excursions, after all, frequently yield materials for the sculptures themselves – even if Earley long ago abandoned the stricture he devised for himself as a student: that he would only make work from objects discovered on the street. There is still a sense in his art of engaging the happenstance fabric of the city – a burned out dustbin, or a flatpack sculpture of the artist's own devising subsequently torched overnight on waste ground – and the materials of daily life in late (and ailing) capitalism: discarded packaging, leftover building materials from a vanished housing and development boom.

A singular image in *Stalker* seems to define Earley's approach to such materials, though it is not actually replicated in his work. It occurs late in the film as the *Stalker* and his companions, who have paid to be inducted into the lore of the Zone and to pursue its alluring promise, are beginning to penetrate the built core of the place, through dark portals and along dank passageways. As frequently happens in Tarkovsky, there is a cut to an image that seems to show part of the same scene or the same space, but

whose exact subject is unclear. It looks, perhaps, like the bottom of a well, in which the water is roiling and pale, and it resembles nothing so much as the strange fogged planet of the director's 1972 film *Solaris*: a surface that seems to spawn precise and aching dreams or hallucinations of home. It's the ambiguity of the image in *Stalker*, and the surface it shows, that strikes me as instructive where Earley's work is concerned. Time and again he proposes substances and surfaces that are not what they seem, that haze and elide distinctions between the throwaway and the permanent. (Though both sides of the material equation are clearly also designed, architectural, even utopian in form.)

Take one substance that recurs throughout the sculptural works. Styrofoam is among the most ubiquitous of contemporary materials, pumped and extruded into so many of our daily encounters with the made and built environment, whether as packaging or insulation. Earley's castings from discarded bits of styrofoam – rescued, for example, from the packaging of a new computer – discover forms that seem to draw on several styles of the past century: in January, the Janus-faced artefacts seem to rhyme with volumes and lines from Modernist architecture and Minimalist sculpture, while their tubular steel support situates the whole enigmatic assemblage in some fantasized interior of the middle of the twentieth century. But it's the material surprise that is most telling; the styrofoam, which looks like concrete, is in fact aluminium: the material mimics both the solidifying stuff of Modernist construction and the ephemera of contemporary commodity culture. There is a sort of materialist pun in play: one thinks of Marx's claim that in the era of the commodity 'All that is solid melts into air.' The immaterialization of goods and labour, of which the flyaway, particulate packaging might be said to provide an allegory, is here reversed, but not quite: the substituted metal has its place too in the history of lightweight construction and mass production. The sculpture is at least two-faced and probably more: pointing to a number of historical junctures at the same time that it shocks with its palpable presence and resistance to touch or decay.

There is a curious anthropomorphism to these castings from styrofoam and the sculptures of which they are part – it's especially true of *Pilgrim*, with its hooded crystal 'face', or *Soul Delay* with its silver cowl of insulation. But it is evident too in

A Million Years Later: a floor-mounted complex slab of oil-black bronze that seems to have leaked a puddle of inky silicon onto the gallery floor: the piece is at once an image of industrial or environmental disaster (Earley reminds us that many of the materials he works with are products of the petrochemical industry) and a picture of some more bloody and grisly event. But again it's the architectural element that is really compelling here: A Million Years Later looks like nothing more or less than the ruins of a late-Modernist complex, the styrofoam original scuffed and slumped in places, the whole subject to an unthinkable long degradation and yet still standing, still maintaining its solidity and form. In his 1911 essay 'The Ruin', the sociologist Georg Simmel argued that ruins embody an uneasy accommodation or equilibrium between the artificial and the natural, between architectural ambition and the organic processes of decay. Simmel had in mind the ruin as figured by the ruin aesthetics of the Romantic period, but his definition might equally stand as a premonition of the fate of the Modernism then under way in Europe: a Modernism that Earley laconically renders in his Dwelling in the Mountains 2, with its chipboard and foam approximation of a Corbusian structure in peril.

The second of those figures that ghosts Earley's work, Robert Smithson, is crucial here as well as in the drawings that explicitly refer to and appropriate images from his work. In 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic', his celebrated 1967 essay for Artforum, Smithson travels to the post-industrial hinterland of the New Jersey town of his birth, and discovers there a ruinous territory that makes of Passaic the Eternal City of the late twentieth century. It's in this essay that Smithson formulates his concept of 'ruins in reverse': contemporary structures that rise into ruin rather than collapsing into decay in a picturesque mode: 'This anti-romantic mise-en-scène suggests the discredited idea of time and many other "out of date" things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the "big events" of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curios, but no past – just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle and the sun has turned to glass.'

It is easy to invoke such a decayed vision of architectural and infrastructural modernity in the aftermath of economic collapse

in Ireland, to see the unfinished building projects of the late-boom era as having 'risen into ruin'. Earley's is not exactly a straightforward citation of Smithson's artistic investment in the 'dialectical landscape': the site that is being built and demolished in the same instant. Rather, he is interested in the material potential today for such a way of seeing: the work that either refers explicitly to, or seems to reanimate some aspect of Smithson's ruinous view of half-built suburbs, does not feel especially melancholic or retrospective. It seems instead to be about certain material ambiguities in the present. Even when the materials in question, such as plaster board and silver insulation, clearly derive from the very recent disintegration of the Irish Building trade. In this case, the sculptural wall in question, entitled '????', is not to be understood as simply a found object from that recent history, but as a spatial anomaly and a surface every bit as enigmatic as the bronze and aluminium castings. The wall is a vast reflector, inviting Earley's other works and the viewer into its blurred and silvery Zone: blurred, that is, until you approach it and find that up close, a few inches from the surface, your own face suddenly comes into focus.

In the end, beyond the profusion of reminders and references that Earley's work provokes, and beyond the recent environmental and economic history that it broaches, it is perhaps this effect and others like it that persist. For all its material heft and presence (in the case of the sculptures) and its knowing play with artistic precursors (in the case of the drawings), Earley's work has a peculiar quality of visual and material oscillation, of threatening to fade from view. This is assuredly one of the effects of the large-scale felt-tip drawings such as A Place Between and Red Sky at Night, where the artist has laboured at length, with modest and everyday materials, in the name of a rigorous linearity, and then, his lines curving towards the horizon, abruptly vanished.

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