

mother's annual 2017

Brendan Earley *Life after Buildings*

April – May

Brendan Earley interviewed by Michael Hill

MH: In *Life after Buildings*, a number of works reference individuals with strong visionary ideologies, such as Agnes Martin, Buckminster Fuller, and Robert M. Pirsig. Their hypotheses of quality, purity and efficiency are reflected in the lightness of tone in your recent work, as well as your approach, which seems free and unburdened. Can you tell us how this outlook has enabled you to pursue this latest body of work?

BE: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was the first book on philosophy I ever read and was the only book about philosophy I ever saw my father read, or heard him talk about. It must have arrived in our house in rural Wicklow some time in the 1970s like a manifesto from a radical countercultural world with which we had no contact. By the time I picked it up it had been in a cupboard in the library, put away for whatever reason with other books from that time – *The Teachings of Don Juan*, *The Lord of the Rings* etc.

It is an uneven book, with many twists and turns, lurching between fictional and philosophical discourse, and between a private memoir and the formulaic impersonality of an engineering or trade journal. On re-reading this dense mixture I can't think what I could possibly have understood of it at the age of 14, but in a bid to impress my father I ploughed on to the end. Awkward both to read and indeed to write about, it lodges in the mind as few recent novels have, deepening its grip, compelling its readers into a landscape of unexpected planes of order and menace. I thought about it a lot when I went to visit Lucy Lippard in Santa Fe. I knew she had befriended Agnes Martin in New York and ended up following her to New Mexico. When you stand in the great basin that is Galisteo, NM, where Agnes Martin lived, you immediately see why she liked drawing straight horizontal lines. Your eyes can't pull away from the horizon and you end up gazing along it, the way your finger would skim the line of a saucer.

At this time, the technology in our pocket gives us extraordinary connection to people, places, and things, and, by extension, it has given us even more freedom. I must admit that I have found a new freedom by abstention. I no longer feel I have to throw the IKEA instruction leaflet away to build again. Abstraction in modernist terms is an alphabet in which you can say anything, but only in its own language. When I built *A Large Complex* in the Douglas Hyde Gallery some years ago, I was not trying to improve on the original concept (modernist design/flat pack, etc.) but to search for an alternative.

What I take from the writers, artists and designers you mentioned is a belief that one has to find one's own alphabet for a language of reverie.

MH: Throughout the past decade, your practice has been acknowledged for its optimistic attempt to rationalise the experience of life in contemporary cities. By collecting and re-appropriating found and reclaimed materials, you have confronted ethics of ecological production and mass-consumerism, and acknowledged our role in continuing the destruction of our natural environment. Now that you have uprooted your home and studio from the outskirts of a city in constant redevelopment, to picturesque countryside, do you feel liberated from the anxieties of city-dwelling?

BE: At some point in all our lives I think many of us consider leaving cities and making our way to the countryside to begin again. For most people it's just not possible to fulfill that dream but we decided it was necessary at all costs. To use the word 'retreat' always seemed to me to somehow suggest that one had given up, the battle was over, and it was now time to run away. I much prefer the word abscond – to take what you know to be precious, worthwhile, and make off with it. But one cannot hide in this world, so the reasons for absconding follow you and that's the way it should be, because with freedom comes responsibility; I will have to disagree with Kris Kristofferson – freedom is *not* another word for nothing to lose.¹

In terms of optimism and rationalism in the experience of life, well, we need more of one and less of the other. To paraphrase John Berger – Hope is not a guarantee but a form of energy one needs during dark days. When I look back over the last ten years I see more anti-rationalism in my work, a desire to ignore the instruction manual, to find another path. This rethink began while living for a few months in Beijing. I read somewhere that mankind had reached a milestone whereby more people now lived in the city than in the country worldwide. It seems humans don't have to evolve to fit our habitat but have changed our habitat to suit ourselves, so to speak. Hans-Christoph Binswanger, a great thinker who I have only belatedly discovered, has had much to say on this contemporary way of life. Early on Binswanger recognised that

endless growth is unsustainable, both in human and planetary terms. The current focus in mainstream economics is, he argues, too much on labour and productivity and too little on natural and intellectual resources. Binswanger's goal was to investigate the similarities and differences between aesthetic and economic values through an examination of the historical relationship between economics and alchemy, which he made as interesting as initially sounds outlandish.ⁱⁱ

We now inhabit a world in which the overproduction of goods, rather than their scarcity, is one of our most fundamental problems. Yet our economy functions by the incitement to produce and consume more with each passing year. This relentless imbalance demands a shift in our values, from producing objects to selecting amongst those that already exist and perhaps alternative paths that run parallel to the obvious one. This guiding principle has always informed my work - and is perhaps the source of my anxiety - and the reason I began making casts of Styrofoam packaging. I want to make something explicate about contradictions between their disposable nature and the material reality of these objects. This contradiction, in turn, feeds into my constant raiding of the past for visions of the future.

MH: In your introduction to *Life after Buildings*, you talk about using drawing as a way of 'rediscovering primordial, or honest shapes that inhabit our unconscious'. Describing it like this, makes me think not only of someone committing a mark to a surface but of the act of extracting or transferring energy from its source, and internalising it in some way. Could you talk about this harmony between the metaphysical and formal characteristics of your work?

BE: Even when we consider the pared down conceptualisation of drawing of the 1960s and 70s, the mark and its relationship to a surface enjoy a symbolic potency that dates back to a spirals found on megalithic structures, such as those found peppered around this country. I think it is drawing's tautological nature - drawing forever describes its own making, its becoming - which attracts me, this eternal incompleteness always re-enacting imperfection and incompleteness.

There are, of course, other aspects to drawing, not based upon a theoretical or philosophical understanding, but on areas of human experience that drawing has become associated with: intimacy, informality, immediacy, subjectivity, memory, narrative. But it always seems to me that that drawing demands to be explored beyond the primal ontological qualities in order to look at other reasons for its value or purpose? Marrying polar opposites: the post-conceptual and the neo-romantic, I addressed an imbalance in my formative years in art collage - a redress of imagination and a desire to recreate. Drawing is always improvisatory and in motion, and in a certain sense, it can proceed ad infinitum without closure or completion continually part of a process that is never-ending. For these reasons, drawing is completely in tune with the metaphysical.

MH: Your previous two solo exhibitions with mother's tankstation both included audio accompaniments in the form of spoken recordings from science fiction stories,ⁱⁱⁱ which addressed ideas of self-discovery in uncharted lands. *Life after Buildings*, has an internalised soundtrack evoked by song lyrics carved into the walking sticks that you have used while exploring your new rural environs. In what ways do music and literature continue to enrich the thinking behind your practice?

BE: As soon as we moved to the country it became obvious that the material for my work, the material that gives form to my ideas, was no longer available on my walks. The Beckett axiom I had worked by 'to give shape to the mess' began to change, to be revised. Again, I think this happened in Beijing.

Walking to the studio in the city always helped gather my thoughts and of course provide material for the day's work ahead, and it has always been my intention to bring the world into the sculptures through the incorporation of found or mass-produced objects. These familiar items not only inspired associations, both personal and collective, each carrying a multitude of potential meanings, but this strategy also waylaid my concerns about *adding to the mess*. It was a form of forgiveness.

My walks in the country are of a different sort. Rather than from A to B in the city they became elliptical-from A back to A-from home/studio back to home/studio. As I travelled this circle, memories would pop up, bits and pieces would enter into my head. Books I had read, films I had seen, half-remembered songs. All fragments I felt I could piece together into something that would somehow be greater than the sum of the parts. After years of trying to put myself in the picture, I suddenly found myself in it. In terms of living and working on a contemporary art practice out here in the country, I find there is little sense of being located in a wider world of artists. There is no sense of the present even with all the wonderful gadgets of contemporary communication. So everything I can lay my hands on for making seems to come from the past, or another life perhaps, but not from the present.

MH: The artist's intentional withdrawal from the expectations of the art world is a topical issue.^{iv} While in your case there are practical reasons for this (such as raising a family), there are also echoes of the 1960s and 1970s countercultural rejection of societal norms. Do you think that there is still the potential to revisit the ideals of those times in the present day?

BE: To return to the words of *Me and Bobby McGee*, I am sure a song about freedom and the wide-open road written in the late sixties would have to allude to a carefree way of life. I don't believe in that. Tom Wolfe identified an interesting leitmotif of the twentieth century, written some years ago as the *ex nihilo* of twentieth century progress. One can see it in the passionate conviction of the Bauhaus founder, Walter Gropius, and in politics (Communism and Socialism) that by starting from zero in architecture and design "man could free himself from the dead hand of the past"^v

At first glance the counter culture evokes not the modern but the pre-modern and the postindustrial: an affinity with nineteenth century dress and an agrarian way of life. In this way "the hippies anticipated the postmodern search for historical symbolism and identity."^{vi} But unlike the technocratic impulse that viewed scientific advances as intrinsically good, the counter culture sought alternative uses for such technology, which were increasingly adapted for personal creative effect and collective betterment. The urban environment could be rehabilitated rather than euphemistically renewed to bring man and nature into an ecological balance. Whether this is true or not only history will be the judge. But in the end I believe that history is not inherited but created, and in doing so, if one begins again, then it is always at the end of something else.

ⁱ *Me and Bobby McGee*, Kris Kristofferson.

ⁱⁱ First outlines in his book *Money and Magic*, 1985.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Before the Close of Day* (2014) featured an audio transcription by Lucy Lippard of Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Sentinel', and *Ghosts of the Future* (2009) included a recording of 'Reports from an Unidentified Space Station' by JG Ballard, read by Brian O'Doherty.

^{iv} The accounts of a number of artists retreating from the art world's codes of conduct are recounted in Martin Herbert's recent publication 'Tell Them I Said No', Sternberg Press, 2016.

^v The Great Relearning, Tom Wolf, *The American spectator*, Dec 1987.

^{vi} *Hippie Modernism*, 2015, Andrew Blauvelt, p11.