

## BRENDAN EARLEY

*Elsewhere and Other Things*

6 April – 18 May 2019

Mark Lewis quotes Baudelaire: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable". Extracted from the original proto-modernist text, Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1863.<sup>1</sup>

[present imperfect]

As I settle down with a cup of tea to write this, my intention is to try and keep it as much on the 'straight and narrow', as possible. Given that I am not very good at that, and that the greater subject area has the potential of more brain-frying, temporal-shiftings, than a good episode of *Star Trek*, let it stand as sufficient warning, to those who read enough of these advance exhibition texts, to duck and cover... Or, in an imagined, prophetic, Yoda-type voice (with unusually conventional syntax), "Confused? *You will be...*"

To paraphrase a favourite passage of the late, great Arthur C. Danto, he argues that the present is essentially nothing more than a 'blank canvas' into which space the "forward-lengthening of the past"<sup>2</sup>, can accommodate the potential of the future. Predicated on the knowledge that 'unknown things' – newness cannot *per se* be 'known' – the still-yet-to-come, can only arise from the accrued collectivity, or the destruction of, things past. In advance of writing this text for Brendan Earley's forthcoming show (in this rare instance I do know what *it will become*) at mother's tankstation London, and intriguingly titled; *Elsewhere and Other Things*, the artist electronically kicked-over a PDF copy of the Autumn/Winter, 2006 issue of 'Afterall', wherein a Mark Lewis essay addressed the paradoxical idea of modernity as antiquity<sup>1</sup>. My tea has gone cold already.

It's slightly shocking to realize that I first wrote about Brendan Earley's work a decade ago, in introducing his solo show with mother's tankstation, Dublin; *Ghosts of the Future*<sup>3</sup>, and that I have not read Lewis' text in a similar length of time. I had forgotten not only its existence, but its pertinence to Brendan Earley's work, and also what a master Earley is – then and now – at (modestly; an important word in Lewis' terms<sup>4</sup>) in exemplifying the essay's complex, relative, ideas of modernity and modernism. A necessary discrimination of 'modern' being Danto's present [nothing/neutral] space, and 'modernism', being the loaded past-tense attribution of an unknown future, created out of the necessary iconoclasm of the past, in turn, passed into the past its own knowing [told you]:

"The real problem, I suppose, is how to represent this passage (from modern to historical, without succumbing to a melancholic reverie; and, moreover, how to try and give form to this when by its very name, *modernism* came to stand for those artistic forms where, metaphorically at least, the present waged war on the past"<sup>5</sup>

One work from Earley's 2009 exhibition still, in memory, negotiates this dialectic with elegant, elegiac, simplicity, necessary wit and ironic 'reverie'. *Too Many Worries*, takes two discrete aluminum castings, from Styrofoam commodity packing, (permanence transmuted out of transience – lost wax casting destroys an impermanent original, to replace it with a impertinent, but permanent surrogate), in turn united and placed one above the other, affixed to a wall, to create a pareidolia<sup>6</sup> (☺), perhaps of a crude Pac-Man ghost<sup>7</sup>, or a retro-futuristic robot skull/face, that for all the world visually alludes to ancient Aztec sculptural solutions. Like much of Earley's practice, in its simplicity of idea-to-execution, a subtle inversion of the modernist dream of form-to-function, it's a near perfect work of art, being of its time, through passing from before to beyond it, thus framing a forever 'not now'.

A line still jumps out at me; "Earley professes to worry about the future [now the present?] and as a hedge-bet against impending disaster, tries to make do with the present [now the past]"

indeed, re-making the future out of the past, or as Fredric Jameson has more elegantly put it; "...transform[ing] the present into the past of something yet to come."<sup>8</sup> There is much to worry about; Brexit, Trump, the rise of right-wing populist politics and appalling hate-driven acts of bitter arrogance; our hearts bleed along with all the sane world, and particularly our friends and colleagues from New Zealand, whose Muslim community has recently suffered such atrocious, brutal savagery. These hurts are the sort of acts that many artists, such as Earley seek to counter through their practices, by genuinely attempting to heal and unify. This, for all the shortfalls of the contemporary art that derives from the modernist project, is arguably its embracing transcendence, a love of the utopian ideal, a faith in humanity as a 'thing', while acknowledging the self-destructive incapacity of humans, as individuals, to fulfill it.

Earley's *Elsewhere and Other Things*, also fuses time frames, and various geo-locations; recent drawings and sculptures, *The Runner*, (to which I will come), and *Take the A Train* - describing two paths, orbits, that can never meet, are bound with an audio work, originally dating from and previously included in his 2009, *Ghosts of the Future* exhibition. A connecting link, being the absent presence of artist, theorist, novelist and friend, Brian O'Doherty, who as a long-term supporter of Brendan Earley's work, and who never seems, absently, and in a connective way between Ireland and New York, very far away. A decade ago, Earley collaborated with O'Doherty in recording an audio work, titled, *Nine Reports*, sourced and structured upon a short story by J.G. Ballard; *Report on an Unidentified Space Station*, originally composed in 1982. A series of utilitarian reports describes the landing of a small crew on a distant, uninhabited space station, to eventually discover that it is an unstable and endlessly transmuting entity of unfathomable, infinite dimensions, a universe through which they have apparently already travelled, to reflexively land upon 'itself'.

O'Doherty's sonorous reading of Earley's re-working of Ballard's classic sci-fi text, unseen, permeates and 'colours' the air of the exhibition. A second layer, like the transmuting space in Ballard's narrative, is shiftingly established by the fact that Earley's newest work in the exhibition was originally made and first exhibited in response to the restoration and re-iteration of O'Doherty's wall paintings, *One Here Now*, originally installed in 1996, and subsequently buried, almost forgotten, under layers of time and paint, at the Sirius Arts Centre, Cobh, West Cork. Where, a little like O'Doherty's, absent voice, the space of this historic building was permeated by the water-reflected light of the Atlantic ocean, that enfolds it, as the town once served as a major departure port for Irish emigration to the U.S.A.

As if ourselves transported, we are shifted in an instant from the Ireland of the late 1840s famine horror to a nostalgia for the lost, maybe never, recent past, of modernist Manhattan, fancifully, built for and by emigrants who became/become immigrants. There is no crime in this, it's how the world works, always has, always will – a re-making of the future out of the past, or again as Jameson expressed, "...transform[ing] the present into the past of something yet to come." Earley's sculpture, *The Runner*, the simple length of bent metal becomes a silhouette of a human form, with one leg literally, mired, as if in a bear trap, jammed in an aluminum cast of Styrofoam packing (casting backwards, to *Too Many Worries*). The sculpture 'wears' a tee shirt sporting the poster image from John Carpenter's 1981 cult, post-apocalyptic sci-fi movie, *Escape from New York*<sup>9</sup>. As the runner is going nowhere, it allows the necessary time for the viewer to closely notice that the tee shirt, is not actually a souvenir print of a filmic fantasy, as expected – itself a complex and temporally loaded conception - but a painstakingly obsessively, hand and pen drawing, made directly onto fabric shirting. Carpenter set his film in the near future (now past) of 1997, where the American government, following a massive increase in crime, had/has turned the island of Manhattan into a maximum security prison, surrounded by a fifteen metre 'containment wall'. Keeping imagined or fabricated threats in or out, sound at all familiar? Kurt Russell playing the character of Snake Plissken, a free-wheeling, independent re-iteration of Baudelaire's modern Flâneur, is tasked with the search and rescue of a hi-jacked president, whom, being the incarnation of a dialectical Baudelairean hero/anti-hero - so outside of society that he can see it objectively for what it actually is or become - he of course frees, while simultaneously exposing his, and everybody else's, human failings.<sup>10</sup> Utopia is hinted at, but eluded.<sup>11</sup>

Given that we have decided to treat 'Elsewhere' as a fictional real, to keep it syntactically correct with "other things", I Google-searched to see if there actually was a 'real' place, so named. Of course one finds that *nowhere* has, in *real* reality, succumbed to such a "melancholic reverie", and its only eponymous iteration is to be found in a 2006, science-fantasy novel, *Elsewhere*, by Gabrielle Zevin, where 'Elsewhere' is cast as an island sea port, not entirely unlike Cobh, aside from that peculiarity of time running backwards.

Somewhere, or perhaps more accurately, nowhere, between the fictional, shifting narratives of Earley, Ballard, Carpenter, Zevin, the future and the past, situates the artist's '*Elsewhere*', acting out as proper noun, whose one half is formed from "the eternal and the immutable", and its antithesis, lightly assembled from *other Things*.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Lewis, 'Is Modernity our Antiquity?' *Afterall*, 14, Autumn/Winter, London, 2006. The Baudelaire quote, heads Lewis's text. Lewis quotes this, while proffering the caveat, that in 1863 (the year that 'The Painter of Modern Life' was first published) there was not yet a clear distinction between modernity (as the fact of modern life) and modernism (the artistic forms that tried to represent and articulate the experience and effects of that modernity).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge University Press, 1968. pg.146

<sup>3</sup> Brendan Earley, *Ghosts of the Future*, mother's tankstation, Dublin. 16 September - 31 October 2009:  
<http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/ghosts-of-the-future/text/>

<sup>4</sup> "...At the same time I acknowledge that to think about modesty as part of the ambition of modernism is almost paradoxical. But sometimes I think modesty is, quite perversely, smuggled in, not noticed at first (a modesty not noticed is a strange tautology, in fact a modest modesty)". Ibid no.1

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Pareidolia, from the Greek: the tendency to interpret a vague stimulus as something known to the observer, such as seeing shapes in clouds, faces in inanimate objects or abstract patterns, or hearing hidden messages in music... (which is, kind of, more scary).

<sup>7</sup> Pac-Man, an 'arcade game', that first appeared in 1980; Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde, are the primary group of fictional ghosts who serve as the main antagonists in the Pac-Man franchise. Bashful, or, Inky, who is a cyan ghost, has a fickle mood and can be deeply unpredictable. Sometimes he chases Pac-Man aggressively, like Blinky; other times he jumps ahead of Pac-Man, akin to Pinky. But on occasions, more like the absent-minded Clyde, who in ways reminds me of Brendan Earley, specifically exemplified in his 'singing/walking, stick' works, he might just 'wander off'. Cf. Earley's 2016 sculpture included in the present exhibition; *Lost in Music*.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* no.3

<sup>9</sup> *Escape from New York*: Carpenter originally wrote the screenplay in the mid 1970s, in reaction to the Watergate scandal. The film concludes with the President preparing for a televised speech to the leaders of a summit meeting, he thanks Snake Plissken, a former army officer and subsequent prisoner in Manhattan, for saving him and tells him that he can have anything he wants. All Snake asks for is how he feels about the people who died in the process of rescuing him, but the President only offers half-hearted regret. The President's speech commences, and he offers the contents of a supposedly revealing cassette; to his embarrassment, the tape only contains the song *Bandstand Boogie*. As Snake walks away, he is seen to intentionally tear magnetic tape out of the real cassette, with the actual message that was intended to be delivered by the President. Incidentally, J.J Abrams producer of the 2008 film, *Cloverfield*, notes that that a scene in the film, which shows the head of the Statue of Liberty crashing into a New York street, was also intended as a tribute to Carpenter and inspired by the film's iconic poster.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> "If we accept that we are modern and that we continue to live in the time of modernity, then we know that modernist representational forms have staked their legibility and 'success' in the figuring of other futures, necessarily utopian, in the possibilities of modernity..." Mark Lewis, again. *ibid* no.1