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SIX OBSTRUCTIONS

EXHIBITION
SIMON ESLING



ATTEMPTS AT IMPERFECTION

Essay
Anna Parlane

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Attempts at Imperfection

Anna Parlane

In the work of Simon Esling, the architectural, the bodily and the mechanical achieve a kind of synthesis. Strange Frankenstein constructions of bone, concrete and timber emerge, startlingly, from the back of minutely rendered military vehicles. Towering, teetering structures float weirdly in mid-air over hazy pastoral landscapes. The body, dismembered, is represented with clinical anatomical precision. Its inner workings are revealed: minus the envelope of skin they are like struts, joists, dovetail joints. There is a sense of suspense, or suspension: the works seem to hover between ideas of construction and destruction, progress and constraint. They are made with meticulous care but allude to violence. They refer to growth and building, but are comprised of fragments.

More on the scale of architectural models than architecture itself, Esling's works can be understood as proposals or schema. An architectural model's job is to illustrate a proposed idea in miniature: it is an aid to imagination that makes something that doesn't yet exist visible and tangible. Models are also capable of illustrating perfection. They are aspirational, they show what could be.

The pairing of architecture and the body is a thesis with a long and distinguished pedigree. In the earliest surviving treatise on architecture, written c.25 BC, Vitruvius described how the Doric and Ionic orders of Classical architecture were developed from the proportions of ideal male and female bodies. A Classical building's plan, façade and ideals of elegance and strength were therefore derived from the human body, with the temple representing the model of bodily perfection.

Anthony Vidler's excellent essay, *Architecture Dismembered*, traces the historical development of this relationship between human figure and architectural form. It is a relationship that endured even through the cultural slash-and-burn of 20th century modernism, as evidenced by the work of cardinal modernist Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier's unrealised city plan, the *Ville Radieuse* of the early 1930s, proposed a city where symmetry and geometry were used to express ideal order.¹ The plan of the *Ville Radieuse* is an abstracted human form, with a head, spine, arms and heart: as Vidler points out, it "unabashedly recreate[s] Vitruvian man for the twentieth century."²

Le Corbusier's artistic and architectural vision sought to reveal universal order and harmony. His iconic statement that a house should be 'a machine for living in' neatly expressed his desire for a smoothly operating living environment and a society which could run with the calm precision of a ticking clock. Le Corbusier's ideas epitomised the modernist ambition to solve the world's problems through good design. His unshakable faith in progress led to his conviction that perfection was not only attainable, but within our grasp.

¹ William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 324.

² Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 75.

The first half of the twentieth century is notable for the sheer grandeur of the ideologies it saw unleashed. In the fields of art, architecture and design practitioners developed parallel ambitions for nothing less than a complete revolution of ideology and practice. The Futurists demanded architecture “as new as our own state of mind is new” and proposed that each generation should abandon tradition and build its own cities afresh.³

In Walter Gropius’ 1919 programme for the Bauhaus school he expressed his ambition for the fledgling institution with religious conviction: “Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity ... like the crystal symbol of a new faith.”⁴ The world was to be re-made, and better this time. This heady mood of reconstructive possibility also infected the world of politics. The rise of the National Socialists in Germany is a chilling confirmation of the seductive power of promises of sweeping change.

Despite the antagonistic relationship between the Bauhaus and the Nazi party, which famously culminated in the forced closure of the school in 1933, and despite their wildly differing methods, the two groups shared a single-minded desire to design a new and better society. Both aimed at universality and immortality. Both believed that the problems of humanity could be fixed by a bold new leadership who would be unafraid to sacrifice old ways of thinking. Both believed that perfection could be achieved. Nazi ideology aligned purity with physical beauty and health. They envisioned the German *volk* as a body suffering a disease, and believed that through violence and sacrifice this collective ‘body’ could be healed. The horrors of mass murder were therefore glossed over by a medical metaphor: surgery, not slaughter.

In *Six Obstructions*, Simon Esling presents architecture and the body intertwined with military vehicles. Construction and growth, the indicators of progress, sprout, literally, out of military technology: utopia is shown to be intimately linked with violence. In Esling’s works, both architecture and body are represented as precarious, damaged, or partial. Bones emerging from the surface of a plinth recall the skeletal remains of victims of conflict: those who, like the many millions murdered by the Nazis, didn’t quite conform to an imagined ideal society.

Esling uses purpose-built, historically accurate models of German, American and Israeli military vehicles to provide specific reference to past and present conflicts. An Israeli main battle tank marooned on its display plinth is rendered doubly immobile by being bisected by a wall. This is a direct reference to the current Israel/Palestine conflict, but also to other walls (Berlin, Baghdad’s ‘green zone’) and conflicts both literal and metaphorical.

³ Antonio Sant’Elia, “Manifesto of Futurist Architecture 1914” in Umbro Abollonio, ed. *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 169.

⁴ Walter Gropius, “Programme of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar, April 1919” in Tim and Charlotte Benton, eds. *Form and Function: A Sourcebook for the History of Architecture and Design 1890-1939* (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1975), 78.

Esling's title, *Six Obstructions*, refers us to the 2003 film *The Five Obstructions* by Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth. This film also deals in themes of conflict and constraint: a cinematic game, it documents a battle between the two filmmakers. Von Trier has challenged Leth to a duel: Leth must remake his exquisite 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* five times, each time incorporating constraints devised by von Trier. In this way, von Trier hopes to disrupt what he calls Leth's "provocative, perverse perfection",⁵ and to move, as he says "from the perfect to the human." *The Five Obstructions* becomes a meditation on aesthetic perfection, pitting von Trier's embrace of the chaotic and unintentional against Leth's controlled aesthetic distance.

As *The Five Obstructions* demonstrates, constraints generate innovation. In *Six Obstructions*, Esling poses constraints for himself that challenge the foundations of the visual language he has developed and refined. Having built a practice based on carefully rendered ink drawings on paper, he here forays out to do battle with sculpture and painting. Esling's six obstructions (cutting, the body, pouring, the wall, abstraction, negation) provide thematic consideration of construction and destruction but also act as a framework of self-imposed rules: enforcing discipline but also necessitating experimentation. Esling describes his works as "thinking tools". They are, by definition, models: small-scale proposals, prototypes or provocations, ideas distilled and simplified to the point where they can be comprehended at a glance. They have the power to represent, suggest or question bigger things: as Esling comments "You're dealing with something small, but you're writing it large in your head".

Models, as any enthusiast will energetically confirm, are not toys. They are not designed for a child's inexperienced hands; rather they are evidence of adult discipline and sophisticated manual skill. But, as Susan Stewart has argued, models are intimately bound up with nostalgia, sharing with toys "an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy ... To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of contexts, none of which is determinative."⁶ Working on a small scale demands greater technical discipline, but perhaps allows for more conceptual flexibility. Where the large insists, the small suggests or questions, provoking consideration of potential future developments. *Six Obstructions* provides a network of references to failed current and historical attempts at achieving a political, aesthetic or social ideal. Esling's synthesis of the body, architecture and the machine seems to suggest evolution towards just such a failed utopia or science-fiction future. His works recognise that any attempt at the elusive ideal is mirrored by its own obstruction: they elegantly model, and toy with, non-determinative construction.

Anna Parlane is a writer and curator living in Auckland. She has recently worked as curatorial assistant for the 4th Auckland Triennial, been co-curator of art and project space Window, and has taught Art History at the University of Auckland.

⁵ quoted in Murray Smith, "Funny Games" in Mette Hjort, ed. *dekalog: On the Five Obstructions* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 137.

⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 56.

Six Obstructions

Simon Esling

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