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SIMON ESLING
SIX OBSTRUCTIONS
2010

ATTEMPTS AT IMPERFECTION
Essay
Anna Parlane

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THE GUS FISHER GALLERY
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 realised 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.

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.

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.

3 Antonio Sant’Elia, “Manifesto of Futurist Architecture 1914” in Umbro Abollonio, ed. Futurist Manifestos (London: Tate
4 Walter Gropius, “Programme of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar, April 1919” in Tim and Charlotte Benton, eds.
Staples, 1975), 78.
5 quoted in Murray Smith, “Funny Games” in Mette Hjort, ed. dekalog: On the Five Obstructions (London: Wallflower
Press, 2008), 137.
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 inexpert 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.” 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.

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6 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 56.
Crystalline Futures
2010
ink and flashe on prepared board
1000 x 1000 mm

Planned Obsolescence
2010
ink and flashe on prepared board
1000 x 1000 mm
LEFT: Autopsy, 2010, flashe on prepared board, 500 x 500 mm
RIGHT: Barricade, 2010, flashe on prepared board, 500 x 500 mm

LEFT: Impasse, 2010, flashe on prepared board, 500 x 500 mm
RIGHT: Reverse Engineering, 2010, flashe on prepared board, 500 x 500 mm

Spill, 2010, flashe on prepared board, 500 x 500 mm
LEFT: Home Module, 2010, mixed media on plywood lightbox
RIGHT: Cineplastic Module, 2010, mixed media on plywood lightbox

Jericho, 2010, mixed media on plywood lightbox
The Point of Exchange, 2010, mixed media on plywood lightbox

Universal Carrier, 2010, mixed media on plywood lightbox
The Renovation, 2010, mixed media on plywood lightbox

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