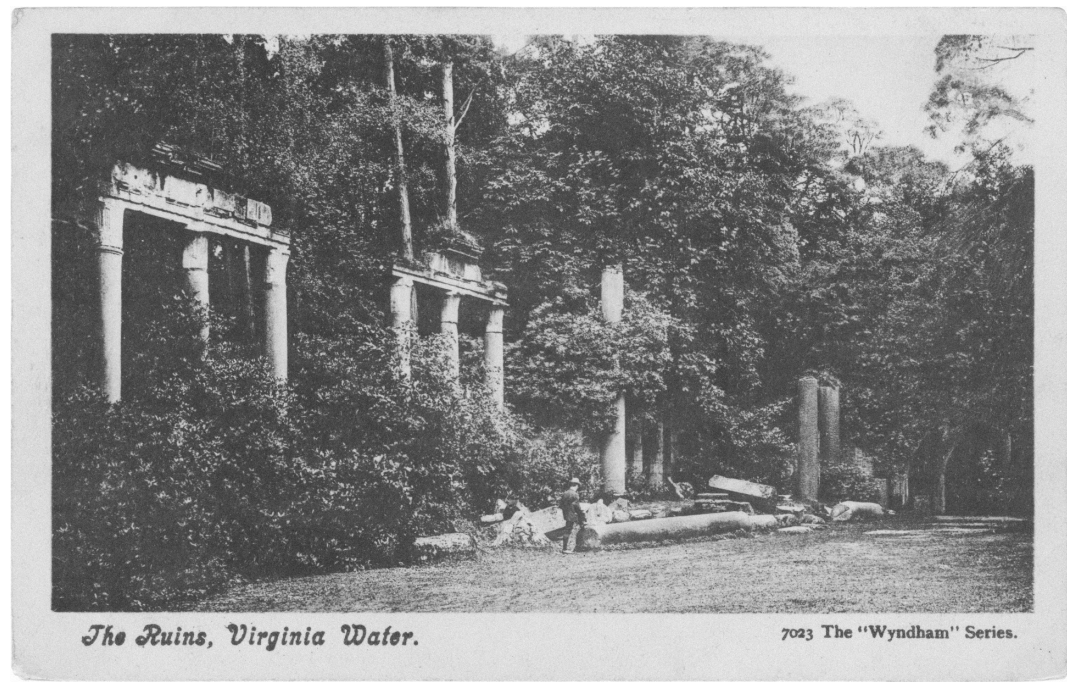


Anna Barham
13 February to 13 March 2010
International Project Space



The Ruins, Virginia Water.

7023 The "Wyndham" Series.

Let’s infantilise our Forms.
Let’s get to the bottom of immaturity.

How many kinds of immaturity can you think of?

Allow me to set up a distinction, in an attempt to avoid misunderstandings. I owe it to the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, and any objections should be raised directly with him. Simply put, it’s a distinction between Form with a capital F, also known as Style or the ‘ought’ given by culture, and form with a lower case f, or the spontaneous shape of things, which we constantly and instinctively produce like bees secrete their honey.

Although it is an opposition of sorts, the relationship between these two is not really a Manichean one; nor is what sets them apart a question of values. This odd duo often occupy successive stages in a thing’s development, either as a result of some gleeful violence wrought by one on the other, or of a kind of willing submission. form loves ruining Form’s righteous showpieces into bite-sized chunks, leaving us to delight at the ensuing disarray and imagine new filler for the gaping holes left behind. And, as with most things, one man’s *F* is often another man’s *f*. On the whole, though, they’re locked in a tangled shuffle: once in a while form’s left foot finds just the spot vacated by Form’s right, but more often it stamps down on the foot itself. Well-known for its immature and anarchic spirit, form revels in its shapeshifting play. Tyrannical Form could never take such a liberty.

Should we then denounce Form, handed down to us by the powers that know best? Perhaps, in the view of W. G. Especially when Form makes us feel stupid and inadequate, which it tends to do with great Formal flourishes. If the structures of culture infantilise us while claiming to enlighten us, pulling the wool over our eyes and leaving us to crash into the next available hard surface, then what? We take matters into our own hands, and infantilise those infantilising structures right back. As a start, we melt down Form and Style, those iron garters of culture, into a monument to the knackered elastic of form.

It’s time to introduce some new characters: the Older and the Younger, types featured in W. G.’s *Pornografia*. These alter egos of Form and form can’t help themselves. They both scamper lustfully after immaturity, albeit with different cravings. Where form merrily demolishes the order carefully established by Form, the Younger forgets its manners and nudges the Older along a warped path to salvation, with spectacular results. “When the Older creates the Younger, everything works well from a social and cultural point of view. But if the Older is submitted to the Younger—what darkness! What perversity and shame!”¹ What glee, Mr W. G.!

But I’m already ahead of myself, and should concede that W. G. was admirably lucid when penning his thoughts about immaturity. It is a subject on which he was torn, but which proved important to his art. W. G. crafted an elegant

treatise on the subject through prefaces to his own writing, in which he played out his ideas. So what did he have to say? There are three kinds of immaturity, each with its own relationship to the great Form/form divide:

- 1 There’s the innate immaturity that results, quite simply, from finding ourselves at odds with the forms we constantly exude. Gangly adolescence; the body or soul’s autonomy in the face of the mind’s demands; carnal disobedience.
- 2 Then there is the immaturity generated from the outside, caused by other who impose ways of being that are at odds with our nature. The pupil’s immaturity in the face of the teacher’s edicts; appalling behaviour resulting from the friction between parent and child; petty but wholesome misdemeanours in the face of our peers.
- 3 Finally, there’s the immaturity imposed on us by culture through its “higher forms”, which we are destined never to attain. The private paralysis of readers in the face of “great” novels; the passerby’s dismay at an impenetrable work of “genius”; inner regression motivated by encounters with alienating artefacts.

Late in life, W.G. admitted that his hitherto equivocal feelings towards immaturity had blossomed and that he was “mortally in love with immaturity”.² W. G. centres most of his writing on this secret attraction to immaturity, the need for the imperfect, the ruined and the unfinished, which is often played out as a tendency to return to a state of ‘work-in-progress’. The idea of the draft, the sketch and the scrappy game—rather than the sophistication and polish of high culture—end up most closely exciting our desires. It may well be that “undervalue, insufficiency, underdevelopment”³ are closer to man’s aspirations than any kind of value *per se*.

And it is true that only the incomplete allows us a say. Only gaps can be filled. Only omissions summon the imagination. The clumsy earthworm fills the page with erratic tracks, which could never match the great landscapes they conjure up in the imagination. The gaps they open up invite an entirely different kind of picturing. There’s a quarrel in the realm of figuration, with figurative language aiming at more than the thing intended, and figurative painting attempting to tell it exactly as it sees it. The written word is always incomplete, pre-ruined somehow. It’s a fate that images resist, more or less successfully.

In the early 1800s, columns, capitals and slabs of decorative entablature were brought to England from the ancient Roman city of Leptis Magna in Libya. The stones

were a gift from the Bashaw of Tripoli to George IV. After a brief sojourn at the British Museum, they were taken to the shore of Virginia Water Lake in Surrey⁴ and assembled into the ersatz ruins of a Roman temple. They weren’t even held together with real masonry, the architect preferring to use thin facing stones filled in with sand and rubble. In any case, by taking these elements of Leptis Magna down a notch or two, from the architectural sublime of imperial Rome to the quaintness of nineteenth century English garden follies, protean form once again had its wicked way with Form. And people delighted in the contrived prettiness of a good ruin. So exotic, so fashionable! Or was it, too, that Form had its way with form, editing the unashamed decay of an organic ruin into petite and picturesque Romantic “ruins”? Further twists and turns in the tail of these curious symbiotic beasts ...

For W. G., the wreckage brought on by an infantilising excess of culture produces a “domain of trash”, a “subculture”. This is a place where—as in Virginia Water—the forlorn stones of a fallen empire are crudely assembled, “where a certain shameful poetry is born, a certain compromising beauty ...”⁵

W. G. found this idea of wreckage so compelling that he molded his protagonists into versions of the same ruined archetype, who goes around committing perverse and immoral acts or entering into ever more regressive and compromising situations. W. G.’s infatuation with the shambolic nature of things and people is linked to another distinction: that between preparation and completion. The trope that embodies this ubiquitous ambiguity between processes and products is the draft: a preliminary version that can also be a finished work.

Life is a series of drafts. It’s an ongoing game of sketching out and tearing up what we hold dear only for so long as it resonates. This drafting perpetually produces ruins: relationships, bodies, emotions, expressions. It is a game, and we look for the rule, the straight stick essential to amusement and oppression alike. Two apparently contradictory uses lurk within that one tool, which simultaneously authorises and forbids. The rules we choose are productive generative constraints for our drafting.

Drafts, outlines, sketches are *useful* popular devices. They are also signifiers of personal and formal immaturity, moments of insufficiency and incompleteness. They are evidence of doubts that goad us towards more refined Forms, which, for better or worse, trigger another round in the Form/form tussle, inciting further immaturity, anarchy and amusement. W. G. fantasised a global and malign case of doubt. In the wake of such a crisis, we would build *A Universal Retreat*, a refuge in which people would recognise the forms they uttered and realise how dissonant they were with their true selves. W. G. yearned for doubt to creep in, for a more tentative species to develop, one that would deflate the pompous utterances and meaningless proclamations of Form. In this retreat, “The bard will scorn his own song. The leader will shudder at his own command. The

high priest will stand in terror of the altar, and the mother will instil in her son not only principles but also ways of escaping them so that they do not smother him.”⁶

Our ruins owe much to the act of looking. From a common fascination for wrecked buildings to great literary cosmologies of devastation, ruins are ubiquitous to the eye, the mind’s eye and the third eye. For architectural theorist Robert Harbison, “ruins are ideal: and the perceiver’s attitudes count so heavily that one is tempted to say ruins are a way of seeing”.⁷ If we direct this ruinate look at language, we notice words, sentences, and texts as ruins waiting to happen. Depending on our attitude, these ruins can be productive and reveal unanticipated truths. An ordered string of letters conceals an abundance of other meaningful shapes; shadows that are finally made flesh by a prophetic game of shifting letters. Played according to a particular set rules, this game involves pouncing on words during their noontime nap and exhorting from them a revelation of the past or future. And because words have an infinitely protean character, the game is never over. This sequence of wreck and revelation uncovers the paradox of ruins as a guiding principle for progress.

The seduction of the ruin means that wrecks everywhere lure us into completing them through imaginary drafting games. In the unremarkable area of Passaic in New Jersey, Robert Smithson, who always looked at the world through entropic lenses and who had an unshakable fascination for ruins, saw a “zero panorama [that] seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is—all the new constructions that would eventually be built ... [that] rise into ruin before they are built”.⁸ The flawed charisma of the ruin embodies the conundrum that in language, literature, art and life, pleasure and success are produced by a combination of skill and incompetence. Squalor inhabits elegance; immaturity loves Style, form can’t do without Form. These double acts will never change. In the meantime, let’s denounce their sick smooching and build ramshackle temples to their brawls!

Ellen Mara De Wachter

⁴
See APPENDIX A.

⁵
Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos and Pornografia*, (New York: Grove Press) 1985, p.8 of *Pornografia*.

⁶
Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdynand*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press) 2000, p. 85.

⁷
Robert Harbison, *The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable*, (London: Thames and Hudson) 1993, p. 99.

⁸
Robert Smithson, ‘A Tour of the Monuments of the Passaic, New Jersey’, *Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Los Angeles: University of California Press) 1996, p. 72. This comment owes a lot to Walter Benjamin’s *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, and is in some senses a ruined version of Benjamin’s original idea.

¹
Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos and Pornografia*, (New York: Grove Press) 1985, p. 8–9 of *Pornografia*.

²
Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos and Pornografia*, (New York: Grove Press) 1985, p. 9 of *Pornografia*.

³
Ibid. p. 5.

APPENDIX A

A draft history of the House of Esox.

Don't talk to me about art; talk to me about pike.

Setting: The Royal Landscape. Land and water over 1,000 acres in the southeastern corner of Windsor Great Park. The lake of Virginia Waters: a gigantic 'W' sprawling lazily across a map. A pretty spot, surrounded by mature oaks and home to gaggles of lopsided birds and clans of pucker-faced fish with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Esox the pike is the only survivor of the ruined family of the Esocidae, who ruled the fresh waters of the northern hemisphere for sixty five million years. It's a little-known fact that in heraldry, the figure of a pike is known as a 'lucy'. What intrigue must be embroidered into the history of this clan! These days, it has a rather low profile; a diluted bloodline and inherited quirks mean that it's the dimmer sort of Esocidae that mopes around the vast aqueous palace of these royal waters.

In the mid 1700s, a small stream named for the Virgin Queen had been dammed and flooded into what was then the largest man-made body of water in the British Isles. The royal playground of Virginia Water became a site for spectacular displays of pageantry and architectural flourishes. The perimeter of the lake was dotted with exotic Roman ruins and fishing temples, while the water itself played host to a procession of Chinese junks or was groomed into ornamental cascades.

The lake is also the site of the British record pike catch of 58lb 5oz.

Investigative phone calls reveal that, annual staff absenteeism notwithstanding, this claim cannot be certified by The Crown Estate.

And, in his *TOP 50 Pike BRITISH ISLES INC. IRELAND*, a list that betrays a noticeable absence of anything weighing 58lb 5oz, Neville Fickling notes:

No record is kept of pike caught by means other than rod and line.

This is a wreck of an investigation. The history of the House of Esox can't be pieced together from shards of non-fact. It's unstructured, shambolic, anaemic, haemophilic. One scratch from a spiky tooth and it bleeds to death. The best that can be hoped for is some ramshackle ichthyology.

The chief, basic torment, as I see it, is simply the torment of bad form, of bad exterieur.⁹

But was it really a four-stone member of the House of Esox they pulled out of the lake in that record-breaking catch? Or was it Proteus, the old man of the sea (here in sweeter surrounding), the all-knowing formless form and reluctant prophet of Pharos, who, anticipating the torment of an unbecoming form, slipped back into the water as a tadpole? The historical title vanishes and the reference yields naught. We can but imagine the glorious disclosures had the angler—like Menelaus—held tight to Proteus and forced a revelation of the lust, murder and sin at the heart of the introverted House of Esox.

APPENDIX B

Let's move this thing forward a little ... let's make a rule for our domain of trash and how we use it.

We will build up using only elements of that which we knocked down. We'll work with what is given, and ask no more. It won't do to go grabbing left, right and centre for new elements, shiny bits from other cracked-up cultures. But we'll parade our asinine complicity with a gap-toothed smile! We'll flaunt the touching twinkle of our gross immaturity. We'll make our anarchy constructive.

Let's do it.

Yes, let's do it!

Now?

Anna Barham

13 February to 13 March 2010

Opening reception Saturday 13 February, 3 to 5pm

Notices: Bruce Nauman

13 February to 13 March 2010

International Project Space

School of Art Bournville

Birmingham Institute of Art & Design

Maple Road, Birmingham B30 2AA

Wednesday 12 to 7pm, Thursday to Saturday 12 to 5pm

Admission is free

Tel. +44 (0)121 331 5763

www.internationalprojectspace.org

