

Cyprien Gaillard by Jean-Max Colard

Cyprien Gaillard recently emerged on the art scene with flashing brilliance and undeniable fire power. In early 2008 he even contributed a permanent work to France's cultural heritage, a sculpture both monumental and invisible, the first synthesis of his earlier work and obsessive quest. With a highly classical title, *La Grande Allée du Château d'Oiron* (*The Grand Entrance Path to the Chateau d'Oiron*) is an invisible monument, a horizontal sculpture bearing the marks of Land Art, Robert Smithson and the minimalism of Carl André. Quite simply, Gaillard covered the dirt avenue to the Château d'Oiron, a small gem of Renaissance architecture, with several tons of gravel. Or rather with rubble—pounded concrete from a demolished high-rise apartment building in Issy-les-Moulineaux. This gravel is not impeccably white but grey, and still has bits and pieces of wood and plastic in it, vestiges of the Mozart tower. And when visitors advance along the path from the gate to the chateau, they are walking, without realising it, on the ruins of a public housing building in the Paris suburbs. *The Grand Entrance Path* is thus not only a monumental work; it is above all a monument. The tombstone of a demolished building. A monument to a dead building which is also the record of the fall of modernism and the exhaustion of the socio-architectural Utopias of the 1960s and 70s, which were quickly degraded by wretched municipal policies. 'But I see those towers without any nostalgia, without any condemnation! I think they're sublime!' This is how Gaillard contrasted the sublime ruin with the special effects of a Sony video clip in a video installation presented at the most recent Lyon Contemporary Art Biennial (*Color Like No Other*, 2007). 'When I saw the famous Sony-Bravia ad made by Jonathan Glaser, I felt that it had a lot in common with my own work, at the outer reaches of dispossession: the joyous destruction of an apartment tower, an explosion of paint in a vandalised landscape. Three days before it was demolished, I went to see it, in Toryglen, south of Glasgow. You could still see traces of painting. It was as if the media had added a layer of ruin and chaos to this half-abandoned neighbourhood. I see this building without nostalgia, as a magnificent monument to the present. Rather than destroy it, they should have varnished it while the paint was still wet!'¹ Gaillard is planning on placing in Glasgow another monument to the dead building, an immense obelisk in recycled concrete (*Glasgow 2014*) from an apartment tower built in the 1960s and recently torn down. The model for this monument will be on view at the Hayward Gallery in London beginning in October 2008. From one tower to the next, Gaillard is in the process of continuing the classical tradition of the park of ruins, but this time scattered across the surface of the planet.

That said, *The Grand Entrance Path to the Chateau d'Oiron* is also, in many respects, a typical act of vandalism. It brings the irruption of the suburbs and their degraded history into the bosom of French cultural heritage. As far as vandalism is concerned, Gaillard is a repeat offender: like a dirty little kid in the suburbs, he emptied fire extinguishers to create foggy clouds in quiet corners of the countryside as far back as his first videos (*Real Remnants of Fictive Wars*, 2003–08). In other works, he has blotted white paint onto nineteenth-century landscape paintings bought at auction. At other times, he slips a black-and-white postcard of a heritage site into a torn envelope, further obstructing the view of these tourist snapshots (*The New Picturesque*). Interventions in the landscape, characteristic aggressions... These varied artistic activities take their energy and form from the urban and social vandalism of angry youth. There is not only a poetics of the ruin at work here; there is also a poetics of the riot. 'This vandalism is my personal response to the vandalism of the state, to the crumbling of apartment towers in the suburbs', he explains. The film *Desniansky Raion*, a true video masterpiece of the past few years, fully explores this link. Navigating among various image regimes taken from the Internet, re-recorded from an old VHS tape or shot by the artist himself, this triptych juxtaposes a pitched battle between hooligans and police, the sound and light show of the destruction of a building in the late 1980s and a bird's eye view of a working-class satellite city outside Kiev. Gaillard gives the work of art back its aura and recovers the sense of the sublime, with all the violence and force of a lightning strike contained in this aesthetic concept.

Finally, *The Grand Entrance Path* is an anachronism in the same way as those admirable seventeenth-century engravings into which Gaillard has slipped views of suburban buildings (*Believe in the Age of Disbelief*, 2005). This is a way of saying that Gaillard is as much at ease with the spectacular as he is with works on paper, in the monumental as much as the small format—all of which gives an idea of his artistic force. In the visual overlapping of styles and periods, his work opens the way to a new historical consciousness. Here the linear and progressive time of modernism is contrasted with a reversible, cyclical time in which eras bump up against one another more than they appear in sequence—an anachronistic conception of history.

1. Cyprien Gaillard, interview in *Les Inrockuptibles*, December 2007.