This is not a house

1.

The Greek word *Oikonomos* (economy) derives in part from *Oikos*, meaning *house*. This is still present in modern Greek which uses *spiti* for house, but also related terms such as , *oika, katoika, oikiakos* and others.

2.

"…
Or through the windows we shall see
The nakedness and vacancy
Of the dark deserted house."
Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Deserted House*.

To begin let's take just one image: it is a frontal view of part of an American house, a fragment, the corner of the house's face brightly illuminated. It is a white house, a wooden clapboard house, probably in white pine, but it could be spruce, or cedar or cypress - all are utilised in the United States. The house has two storeys. The window on the second floor is divided into four wooden sub-frames that are in turn divided into six small glass panes. On the first or ground floor the window frame rises about a quarter higher than that on the second and is divided again into four smaller frames each further divided in this case into nine small glass panes. Some care has been taken with ratios. The two storeys are divided by a pitched half-roof sealed by grey tiling. It echoes the main roof glimpsed above. It is probably a goodly sized house to the average European and for millions of American citizens too. The mortgage on such a property would have been substantial if not astronomical. But the house is not distinctive. Some rendering of the white clapboard style is pretty well America's default domestic architecture. It is classical American. It goes back to the settler beginnings of Anglo-America. It references an established tradition, that of deep (Euro) Americaness. It proclaims belonging – to home and nation, and the affluent middle class.

Of course we can see that this home has been undermined. The windowpanes have been shattered. Jagged glass shards remain as indices of some kind of assault. An unease in the relative proportions of the building has prepared us for this. Like a wide collar, the half-roof extends dramatically. It exceeds the extension of the main roof by an

order of three. While it would have afforded increased shelter it unbalances the overall design, undermines what symmetry is striven for. And on closer inspection it is clear that the frontage has never been developed. The house is damaged and yet pristine. Perhaps it has never been inhabited; the client withdrawn, the builders departed before completion – a ruin before it ever became a dwelling.

But this is not a house it is a photograph; and present in the photographic qualities is an element more disturbing that these signs of incipient destruction. The white forms of the building stand out against the darkness within, around and beyond it. It is a blackness both profound and absolutely flat, actual and equally abstract. The house contains this darkness and is contained *by* it. Is this just the darkness of night? Or is it an aesthetic device – the black against which to throw the white forms into dramatic relief, presenting the uninhabited house as pure design, utility become beauty? Or is it the mark of an absence that haunts all these houses and of the forces of negation that produced it – economic, political – even metaphysical?

3.

> "A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability (…) Without it, man would be a dispersed being (…) It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world".
> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Ruins remind us of the mute materiality of the world, of the stuff that cares nothing for our futile projects, that recognises nothing of the order our architectures try to impose on the world. Yet, ruins are for the most part one of history's set designs and from out of them meanings are erected, representations made. Think only of the photography of American ruins: the burnt buildings of Civil War Atlanta in 1864; Arnold Genthe's vistas of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire, or Mark Klett's photographic reflections on the same event from the city of 2006; the abandoned sharecropper's shacks in the FSA photographs; the photography of the ghost town; Clarence John Laughlin's deserted and decaying Mississippi plantation mansions shot in the 1940's; the press photos of the torched tenements of Newark and elsewhere during Black America's risings of the 1960's; Robert Adam's provisional looking Tract house projects in the desert; Joel Sternfeld's dream house undermined by landslide, or his sites polluted by atrocity, places of ruined memory; and of course, there is the Ground Zero imagery of

Meyerowitz and countless others. American disasters tend to become iconic. There are strings of websites devoted to the photography of abandoned motels and of ghost towns. One of the images from this work has already been appropriated by one as an example of "the new ghosts towns" of "subdivisions and MacMansions" that people can no longer afford (www.inquisitr.com/ 28369/the-new-ghost-towns/).

The history and imagery of the ruined shelter or settlement are required to furnish the continuing epic of travelling and moving on that is the USA – or do we now say, "was"? – an epic of disasters endured and overcome for sure, but one ever attended by a sense of America's precariousness, of its own brevity, its own uncertainty about where and if it belongs. In this regard James Wines' cracked and crumbling Houston BEST store built as a ruin, as though already shaken apart by tremors, is either a snoop cocked at fate or an inoculation against it; or perhaps a claim to permanence posing as its opposite, that is solidified ideology.

European America, then, is a Settler Nation, and at times an unsettled one. The house or the shelter has special connotations there that convey the story of established communities or of the mass triumph of privatised middle-class family life initiated from the 1890's by Sears and Roebuck catalogues and stores. At the same time, from the cabin-in-the-clearing, through the circled wagons to the 'gated communities', the house and shelter is stalked by an accompanying history of fears and beleagurement. Any disaster concerning the shelter, the settlement, is extended very quickly into a metaphor for a whole historical process.

America is also the embodiment of that precarious project Modernity, and Modernity, argues Henri Lefebvre, produces two contradictory conditions. On the one hand is the promise of 'Comfort', of which the Home is the core both ideologically and in terms of material well-being. On the other, says Lefebvre, lies the continuous imminence of what he calls 'Ferocity' which can appear in the shapes of war, terrorism, technological and ecological disaster, and the visitations of economic crisis or collapse (Lefebvre 1995: 190). Martins' images present us with the points at which these conditions have recently collided. As Norfolk, Ristelhueber and others developed the 'Late Photography' of the battlefields of the Gulf and Afghanistan, so Martins has done so for the aftermath of the Credit Crunch (see Campany 2003)

Photographs, says Vilhém Flusser, “dam up history in order to make it into a tableau”; in them the scene replaces the event (*Writings* 128). Some of Martins’ picturings in this work do evoke the idea of staging. But the effect is more than simply theatrical, a deferment or denial of history, for it is the historical or social reality of the ‘toxic economy’ that remains dramatised in the images as a condition of seeing, or rather of the visibility of the object. If the photograph halts the narrative of history here the effect is relevant, for depicted here is development paralysed, a disabled project – stasis, that condition so feared by modernity. The buildings stand before the viewer like the scenery of a bankrupt theatre, the sets of an abandoned movie project. Nothing moves in or through them. It would be a mistake to assume, as some appear to have, that the visual elegance, the abstraction, the careful rendering of formal values and the necessary manipulation that exist here as in much of Edgar Martins’ practice are inappropriate qualities when applied to the themes of this present work. It is true that the crisis and human unhappiness indicated in many of these images is real enough, whatever the class of those who bear them, and they impose on any photographer some kind of ethical responsibility. However, Martins has never been a humanist photographer, nor is he a social documentarist. There is coolness, and a distancing throughout his work, and an overriding concern with form. There is even a case for describing him as a metaphysical photographer. And yet it is precisely certain of these qualities that seem so effective here. For example, in this work it is the absence of the human figure that pronounces the landscape human; the human is the principle that has gone missing, that has left a visual silence. This is a human crisis. And it is in the transmutation of lived spaces into near-abstract structures that the wider abstractions of the financial markets, of an uninhabitable economy, are indicated, made present in the deconstructions they have brought about. The departure of the human figure from these spaces is more than an aesthetic choice. Speaking through what Jacques Ranciére terms, “the silent language of things”, these images depict more than an immediate actuality; they picture a *condition* which is social and empirical, yet which demands an aesthetics which cannot be served adequately by immediate observation or record alone; they by-pass both the dystopian melancholy to be found in some social

documentary and the exclusion of the Social that characterises much of the art of voided places (Ranciére 2006: 36).

In some instances the work summons up the conventions of landscape painting and photography, indeed landscape is the theme of much of Martins' practice. The representation of landscape is commonly based in the retrospective, distanced and even nostalgic viewpoint, often displaced from the present. Here its effects intensify the viewer's reading of the precise objects/events in the photographs. If one accepts Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections, landscape art has always depicted emptiness and loss.

> "Landscape begins with a notion, however vague and confused, of distancing and of a loss of sight, (*une perte de vue*), for both the physical eye and the eye of the mind". (Nancy 2005: 53)

Landscape, he says, comes into being when the human figure loses the foreground or disappears completely; when the Gods have departed and the weight of allegory has lifted. It arrives as part of a deep transformation in the mentality of its time. "A presence", he writes, "is withdrawn", hence, "The landscape is the space of strangeness or estrangement (…)", (Nancy 2005: 53 & 60). In Martins' landscapes it is less the Divine that has withdrawn than the elements of a *secular* sacred, that is, individual citizens and private property, inhabited wealth and of course beneath it all, the loss of Capital value. The frozen constructions and deserted interiors may turn out to be symptoms of another crisis to be cured. Alternatively, they may be signifying the relative decline of America power, even the destabilising of meaning or a system of meaning. Nancy notes that as the landscape form was ushered in by a loss or a displacement of meaning, it depicted place, "as the opening onto a taking place of the unknown", (Nancy 2005:59) No longer was land depicted as "location" (*endroit*) but as "dis-location" (*envers*), void of presence and giving no access to any elsewhere that is not itself" (Nancy 2005:59). The depth of absence in Martins' photographs is chilling: the half-made roads running among non-houses; the construction site fading into the twilight, seemingly losing all materiality; the golf course with no players; a remoteness seeping into the neighbourhoods that failed to come into being. Perhaps an even greater absence lies in the loss of our ability to name, to recognise these places. They are no longer nature as development has overtaken them; but they are not quite material culture either, the development has halted and gone having invented 'Nowhere', which, as it happens, is the meaning of More's word, 'Utopia'. These places, unnameable,

suspended between categories, Edgar Martins knows well. It is in the darkness, in the failing light and the black sky that he brings together the social and the metaphysical dimensions that inhabit his work including this. And in the darkness we can detect the absence of any alternative historical narrative in this moment or at least the inability of America to imagine one. It recalls the nothingness that stands beyond the door in Sartre's *Huis Clos* / *No Exit*; or around Beckett's 'places', signifying that there is no outside of this.

For Heidegger dwelling forms part of the grounds of our Being in the world. Dwelling he writes is none other than, "the relationship between man and space" (Heidegger 1971:29). If dwelling has been undermined then in the darkness converging on the house we can detect the presence of non-Being. In this the effect of Martins' visualizations is to complete the circle in which the historical and the metaphysical meet.

5.

Reality / Real Estate / Realtors / the "Real Economy"

Some discomfort has been expressed over Martins' limited digital reshaping of images in this work as if this will have diminished any claims it may have to authenticity. It is a curious reaction given the non-Social Documentary nature of his back catalogue. Furthermore, it appears to reveal a misunderstanding of photography's present situation. This work is themed around a crisis and, as we shall see, it is also work formed by a crisis in its own medium.

Now the word *crisis* is rooted in Greek words meaning 'decision'. The word *decision* has connotations of 'cutting', of 'down cutting'. *The This is not a House* is a photographic intervention into a crisis. Before it is a set of images, it is a series of decisions, of cuttings into. In a certain sense the work is a set of fictions. And fiction is a way of cutting into, cutting out and rearranging the Real. Ranciére states that, "the real must be fictionalised in order to be thought" (Ranciére 2006: 38). So, the Real must be transformed (and translated?) in order to be understood. The word *fiction*, has connotations of a false move used to produce real effects (a *feint*), and at the same time it signifies the idea of something made ('*fact*' and *'factory'* share its roots), something

actual though manufactured (Kermode 200:II). Fictions, like decisions, and crises, are *made*. However much we continue to accept photography's indexical facility, to photograph something is necessarily to fictionalise it, to select, intensify, to link the abstractions (cut) from the visual continuum into sequences and so on are all acts of fictionalising. Photographs establish not so much a reproduction *of* the Real, as a relationship *to* that federation of perceptions and reflections, discourses and simulations that, beyond brute materiality, makes up the Real. As the producer of consciously 'aesthetic' work Martins' is not attempting to simply record actuality. The work *plays* on the borders between what Ranciére calls, "the logic of facts and the logic of fictions" (Ranciére 2006: 36); it is itself formed from that relationship, a product of another crisis in which the categories of Art Photography and Documentary Photography have not so much fallen apart as fallen into each other. Martins' work is the bearer of the crisis it engages with, a crisis that is only in part economic. More immediately the manifest theme of *The This is not a House* places it at a point where parallel themes converge, each governed by a fear of the loss of reality: the concern that digitalisation has undermined photographic realism and compromised any truth-telling facility in the medium and beyond; and the fear of Wall Street's undermining of what is interestingly referred to as the *real* economy. The Philosopher Peter Osborne (1) has suggested that such anxieties over the epistemological turbulence caused by the ubiquity of digitalisation are themselves the displaced instances of the more fundamental unease experienced over the loss of the real in the Snakes and Ladders practices of finance Capital whose repercussions have spread virally far beyond the obvious domains of the business quarter. Labyrinthine complexities of ownership, the speed-of-light transactions, the fictitious financial products, imaginary capital assets, the hedges and the futures, the toxic debts, foreclosed mortgages, and bankrupted businesses, are the true causes and the real effects of a loss of reality, of a world that can barely be thought. Martins' real fictions though are foregrounded – in clear sight. Wall Street's fictions fooled almost everybody.

6.

Martins interferes in a real that has already been badly interfered with. His interference is made visible most dramatically through the use of the sequence of images of often precariously balanced objects forming assemblages or constructions – I'll call them sculptures – erected by Martins in the deserted interiors from out of the

debris and *bric a brac* left behind. The images are distributed through the work acting as a kind of *dissonant counterpoint* against the dominant theme of the panoramic or formalised imagery of buildings and landscapes. The sculptures resemble the near accidental found assemblages photographed by Richard Wentworth in the streets of Berlin (*Berlin 117*), or the playful sculptures of Fischli and Weiss and of the New Zealand artist Paul Cullen. They are like note-taking with objects; a poetic *bricolage*. In the way in which their precariousness mimics that of the buildings all round them, they might be seen as a form of commentary. Maybe they are the expression of Martins' desire to make something out of the uselessness around him, a playful gesture of creativity against the desolation. For sure, there is an attempt here to evolve a 'form of visibility' in which the two contrasting sequences of representation and practice focus our attention onto the overall *madeness* of the work as a whole; that is, its fictiveness. They are markers, the indices of Martins' activity – the photographs of others' constructions and those of his own – as, in both sequences, an arrangement of objects, a manipulation. They record Martins' own performance, his inclusion in the world represented, his responsibility for its depiction. They echo here Jeff Wall's "gestures of reportage and performance" (Stimson :109), his "subjectivised witness" (Rosler 2004:211). In the light of this, Martins' utilisation of digital processes is underscored as no more or less a manipulation than the any of the other processes and strategies he has employed.

7.

The real has become unreal. The deserted buildings suck presence out of the landscape. Some interiors with their uncovered structures and scattered components of heating and ventilating systems, take on the appearance of gallery installations. Like the abstractions of the economic system that has brought them to this state they have become pure forms with no content. Some of the buildings resemble doll's houses or miniature model villages. It is not photography that has made them strange but the economy upon which these houses and interiors were founded – an economy as illusory as the interiors in a Thomas Demand picture.

'This is not a House', produces not a singular truth but a process of truthfully 'recomplicating reality' (2), one embodied in the evidence of its own beauty and founded in the documentation of its own aesthetics.

1. Until its scandalous closure in 2010, Peter Osborne, not to be confused with the author of this essay, was Professor of Philosophy in the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at the University of Middlesex. He has accompanied the Centre to its new location at Kingston University in South-West London.

2. A phrase used by Don Delillo to describe the function of the novel.

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