

DOUG AITKEN. THE ART OF FALLING APART (page 80) The vastness of the West Coast, which has inspired many artists (musicians and poets alike), is also very present in the work of Doug Aitken, who was born there in 1968, at Redondo Beach. "When I look out the window of my home," he says, "I have an immense car park, hordes of tourists, some homeless people and the Pacific Ocean. The end of everything is here, due west, where the road ends." It's a gaze towards the infinite, and this was understood by Sergio Leone, who used American actors for his Westerns because, he said, they have the horizon in their eyes. "House", one of Aitken's most recent videos and presented at the Venice Biennale of Cinema in 2010 and then in December as an installation at the Regen Projects Gallery in Los Angeles, is defined by the author as his "most complex and nuanced work." Aitken, who is a leading contemporary artist, has continued over the years to place landscape at the centre of his installations and videos, landscapes of a solitary and immense California that are more psychological than panoramic. What makes "House" doubly interesting is the fact that it was inspired by a dream Aitken had when he was about to demolish his old bungalow on Venice's beach, where he had lived for more than ten years, to build a new home. In the dream, the artist's elderly parents sit immobile inside the building, while the house comes down, but they don't suffer a scratch. As a result of this, Aitken decided to make a video and film the real demolition of the bungalow; his parents are also included, protagonists of a dream made into images: "In the film, my parents sit immobile at a table facing one another. In the minutes that follow, the simple house where I lived slowly and inexorably collapses, until all that remains is a heap of rubble. Throughout the demolition, my mother and father remain silent and immobile, seated at the table, under a shower of rubble and breaking glass." The elderly couple's static and serene aura – it's as though you can almost hear their breathing – contrasts with the rubble falling around them, creating a sense of alienation; two parallel and disassociated worlds: the individual and sentimental against external reality. In contrast to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher", where the characters are dragged terrifyingly through the self-destruction of the house, here the protagonists remain impassive: "They show no signs of anxiety, they are serene, reflecting their total resignation to the fact of the demolition. At the end, all that remains is the block of land, a void in the middle of other buildings in Venice Beach; the perimeter of a rectangle outlined in white is the only evidence of the presence of the house before its destruction. The video then begins again, and the process continues." The place is knocked down without harming the couple: is this a symbol of the hero of the New Continent, dedicated to conquering – alone against everyone and everything – hostile nature and the external world? For Aitken, who is more interested in the process of expressing an idea than its real dramatic content, "the appeal was in attempting to create choreography for the bungalow's demolition. I saw it as a dance, close to William Forsythe's idea of movement: on the one hand, my parent's immobility, almost a trance state; and on the other, small signs that are slowly charged with an ever increasing violence. It's the contrast between action and stillness." It's an inverted process, where you begin at the end and not the beginning: the completed life of the two elderly, and a house that ends in nothing, rather than rising from nothing. For the artist, though, the references are not about the before or the after: "In my opinion, the best moments are those where you stop thinking about past or future, and completely immerse yourself in the now. In a certain sense, 'House' investigates this very perpetuity of the present." Venturing an analogy, a temporal one in this case the end, with the white perimeter outlined on the pulverized land, almost becomes an involuntary homage to the birth of Venice Beach itself, which occurred at the end of the Nineteenth Century, when Abbot Kinney, who had founded Ocean Park in 1884, won in the toss of a coin that arid land despised by everyone; indeed, the project for Venice, conceived to become a replica of Italy's Venice, was derided and called "Kinney's folly". Sandy dunes, marsh and sterile land became the future Venice Beach, made up of modest and inexpensive homes, which in the 1960s attracted artists of the Beat Generation – including Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Ed Moses, and Raymond Pettibon – and a large part of the Ferus Gallery group. Today, and more so after the past decade when the real estate boom drew the wealthy, the area is made up of a real mix of people from different ethnic and social backgrounds. "Here different cultures co-exist; they live together but each protects its private secrets. It's the landscape of the West, which intrinsically has no sense of time and space. It's an open and liberating landscape, but at the same time it's terrifying and full of restlessness." Another, and again perhaps involuntary, symbol of the relationship between old and new

can be found in the installation of the work by Regen Projects. Two flat-screen monitors, with corresponding background walls, were placed at the centre of a table in the middle of the exhibition space; and as in the film, two benches were placed at the side of the table. Piles of rubble from the demolished house were set around the table and along the gallery walls. And yet the vast exhibition space, which enclosed and encompassed all that old debris within its walls, became, in the end, like a new house. “‘House’,” continues Aitken, “is a work about disappearance; what I wanted to show is the process of disappearing. And I did it using the things that are closest to me: my family, home and sense of a place. In some way, it’s about both a work of art and a hologram, a hologram that captures its own disappearance and with it, the disappearance of people, lives, and the places that make up the images.”

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