CHAPTER 9

Conclusion: Ruining the Ruin or Pausing at a Partial View

While reflecting on Goat Island’s work, *It’s an Earthquake in my Heart* (2001), Matthew Goulish, co-founder and performer with the company, writes, ‘We have discovered a performance by making it’ (Goulish 2001, n.p.). In a similar vein I have discovered a book by writing it. My own professional practice and teaching over 30 years have been rooted in devised theatre and an understanding that a piece of work is never finished, and is being made, invented and re-invented as an ever-unfolding process punctuated by public performances. This book is a consequence of discovering, through research and field work, what ruins do, how they work, what they offer, how people perform in them and how we might think about decay, dereliction and ruination at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century. Following cultural geographer Doreen Massey, who wrote that ‘a lot of enquiry consists in reformulating the initiating question’ (Massey 2010, n.p.), my process has not simply been a matter of stacking up new knowledge, but equally importantly it has required recalibrating and reformulating information and thoughts that I already had. Discoveries made before and during the writing of the book, discoveries made partly through desk-based research, but, more importantly, through ‘being there’, as Diana Taylor writes in her essay ‘Performing Ruins’ (Taylor 2009, p. 14) of the experience of a guided tour by Pedro Matta within one of General Pinochet’s partially ruined torture centres in Santiago de Chile. Matta, we learn, is one of the surviving torture victims, originally held in this ‘dark ruin’ (Taylor 2009, p. 13),
the Villa Grimaldi. Taylor reflects honestly and perceptively on what her ‘being there’ with Matta, a survivor of this dreadful place of torture, means for her—and him—in relation to both the trauma and the politics embedded in this location. None of my experiences, however, except perhaps for Mostar and Sarajevo, exposed me to sites of such extreme trauma and distress. That most of the ruin narratives articulated in this account have entailed my ‘being there’ and often talking to key protagonists involved in these performance events is not to claim some questionable authenticity or foundational truth to my writing, but simply to suggest that having—an albeit often fleeting—sentient relationship with these places has provided a different or additional way of knowing. A knowing beyond the page or the computer screen which has generated a diverse sense of these ruinous places and the activities and motivations of those who were actively involved in them. Ruins become known not only though historical and conceptual context, but also through their material structures and as an ‘affecting presence’ (Armstrong 1971, p. 26).

What has become abundantly clear over this investigation is that any kind of singular or unitary perspective on what ruins are, how we should think about them and how performance performs in these spaces is an errant quest. As Pétursdóttir and Olsen write in their introductory essay to Ruin Memories (2014), ‘things – ruins – do not bow to any one approach’ (2014, p. 5). Ruins are happily stranded between classifications and offer the challenge to embrace—and celebrate—several ways of thinking at the same time. As such, it is productive to see cultural and particularly performance interventions into ruins as potential sites of plenitude and laboratories for experimenting with ideas and artistic practices. Apart from ruins of antiquity (Chap. 3) all the sites which figure in this account are modern ruins in that they have been destroyed or rendered derelict from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Ranging from factories, shipyards, Cold War listening posts, the site of a devastating earthquake, the Berlin Wall, a seminary, a department store, a cinema and a supermarket, these sites of ruination have one quality in common. Through economic and political change, natural catastrophe or warfare they have had their original form and function erased and destroyed. Of course, the extent of material destruction of these places when I encountered them as cultural sites of occupation varied according to time frame and the reasons for their ruination. In my conversation with Mike Pearson (Chap. 7) he regularly spoke of Brith Gof’s ‘occupation’ of factories, warehouses and abandoned farm houses for each theatre project in question, but this notion of
occupation, although generative, is a complex one in that it covers different motives and practices in diverse situations. All the cultural occupations identified above share some sense of protest and dissent with a concomitant desire to put the building or location to a different, more productive and creative use, if only for a limited period of time. Some of these occupations were with permission (although such an agreement may have been time-limited, fragile and mutable) and some were illegal in that the occupation by the artists was formally without consent from the authorities concerned. In the former category, for example, we can identify Brith Gof’s occupation of various industrial sites, NVA’s occupation of St Peter’s Seminary and the heritage-framed occupations of Landschaftspark and Zollverein in the Ruhr region of Germany. In the latter, the occupations of Berlin’s Tacheles and Teufelsberg or Athens’ Green Park café and the Embros Theatre were at least initially without approval and were driven both by a sense of protest at the lack of affordable work spaces for artists and a demonstration against wider social and political conditions. Certainly, in the case of Athens, occupations were also driven by anger at the deprivations experienced by Greek citizens from the brutal austerity imposed by global banking institutions and the EU in 2010, and subsequently, but reluctantly, agreed by the Greek government.

In the capacious field of Ruin Studies, it is often noted how the ruin—buildings or locations—play with time, or at least has a complex temporality. I have reflected in the first two chapters that ruins are continuously ‘on the move’, both in the sense of their material deterioration and in terms of how they gesture to both past and future. Pointing to the past the ruin becomes not only a complex testimonial of and for memory, most plangently for those who once had an intimate connection with the site in question, but also that sense of where the building has come from and what caused its ruination, what it might have been and what it has become. Here the ruin signals its own future: one of further imminent decay and destruction or perhaps repurposed for an alternative future and function. The intervention of performance and other artistic activities into sites of ruination unsettles these time dynamics, offering temporary suspension in either the process of entropy or reconstitution for other commercial or cultural purposes. Sometimes ruin performances represent a liminal space, a punctuation mark between different states of ruination, and at others, a prolonged occupation which may last years (St Peter’s, Tacheles or Teufelsberg), or even an open-ended one such as Nuova Gibellina.
The performance and theatrical projects described and reflected upon over the preceding chapters represent both a diverse range of activities and manifold relationships with the ruined environments which they occupy. These portraits are singular in their particular and detailed practices, but, also, as has been identified above, reveal some patterns and commonalities. In almost all these cases the performance events which have taken place in these locations have a nuanced relationship with both the materially ruined environment and its immaterial history. The sitedness of all these performance projects is intriguingly complex. In no cases is there an exact fit or congruence between performance event and the history, original function and current materiality of the ruin in question. This book was never framed as another investigation into site-specificity, but what it has—unwittingly—revealed is a more generative and pleasingly complex way of configuring the web of relations between live performance events and their material surroundings. Furthermore, beyond this are the elusive, always unstable and ephemeral relationship(s) between the piece in question and the immaterial memories, moods and atmospheres generated by audience reception and interaction with the work.

The example of Mike Pearson’s work with Brith Gof illustrates some of these shifting and unstable relationships. *Gododdin’s* construction in and for the empty Rover car factory in Cardiff was always a dramaturgically elastic one since the abandoned Cardiff engine factory stood in for hundreds of other industrial spaces across Europe rendered derelict by the political/economic regimes of Thatcherite and other neo-liberal governments. Moreover, for Pearson a too tight or reductive relationship with the ruined site would have produced a theatrical reconstruction, far removed from Brith Gof’s political intentions and aesthetics. Similarly for Farquhar, NVA and St Peter’s Seminary, although there is a strong element of site-specificity to the embryonic cultural and performance work undertaken there, the site itself was treated as a prompt or trigger for performative ‘laboratory’ experiments across the fields of performance, ecology, archaeology and history. For many of these projects the very act of occupying a ruined or abandoned space is a statement in its own right, regardless of the nature of the performance executed therein. This clearly is the case with the Mavili Collective’s occupations of Embros Theatre and Green Park in Athens. Here, performance is a secondary but significant tool and expression for the protests and anger which were the force fields propelling these actions. In different ways the extraordinarily heroic theatres under siege in Sarajevo or Jacek Glomb’s impassioned and angry
theatrical work with Teatr Modjeska in the abandoned cinema, supermarket and piano factory in Legnica are all highly charged statements in terms of just ‘being there’—for the Serbian forces, Polish authorities and immediate communities. Beyond this, the actual theatre which was performed in these spaces fills out these occupations, gives them form, shape, content and liveness that together articulate the total experience of performance as political protest. For Ludovico Corrao in Gibellina contemporary art and performance are the animus not simply to offer a new future for the 1968 earthquake survivors, but also to suggest that the reconstitution of the remaining community lies as much in the emancipatory qualities of art as it does in bricks and mortar.

Behind or beside both the political propulsion of protest and dissent and the form and dramaturgies of works performed, there remains for many of these protagonists, on the one hand, the elusive and mysterious fascination for ruined spaces, and on the other the pragmatism of needing to occupy abandoned low or no cost spaces for work, social or domestic purposes. However, for none of these artists and activists was the attraction built upon the lyrical allure which classical painters or eighteenth-century Romantic poets and writers had for the ruined fragment. Three of the people I interviewed each put it slightly differently. For Pearson the pull of a dilapidated, soon to be demolished industrial space is rooted in his sensibility as a performance maker. His comment to me in conversation quoted earlier deserves repeating here:

I do wonder if the attraction is that their state of dereliction or abandonment almost meets a kind of work which is trying to assemble itself within that occupancy and the hope that those two things meet in the middle, come together. (Pearson 2019)

In Berlin, activist and performance maker of three decades, Paolo Podrescu spoke of ruined sites as being ‘liberated zones’ (Podrescu 2018), but these I sensed were much more than practical workspace solutions for impoverished artists. These places seem to have had a particular charge or force field which offered ways of living, not determined by the cash and commodity nexus, but by relations of mutuality, exchange, support and creativity. Through a different lens, Athens-based theatre director, Simos Kakalis (see Chap. 8) told me that his decision to stage Apokopos in the old oil mill at Elefsina was due to his sense that this abandoned place spoke resonantly to the dream performed in Bergadhis’ poem. For Simos, the
long dead oil mill was a place of ghosts, of rituals engaging with the dead and the dying and he believed that the memories generated by the meeting point of poem and material space would well serve his dramaturgical mission.

This book is not a representative survey of ruins nor a taxonomy of performances enabled by them. It has approached ruins through a range of lenses: the intuitive and the analytical; the rational and the romantic; the affective and the cognitive and the associative and the deductive. Rather than mutually exclusive binaries, I regard these dualities to be in a reciprocally propitious relationship with each other, for this is how to approach a ruin and the cultural work that it may afford. Across different countries of Europe at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century this narrative identifies ways of encountering ruins through practices of performance in a world where dislocation, disorder and disruption seem to be dominant modes of experience. There is no mechanical or reductive relationship between ruins and the cultural activities they may enable, rather that the ruin in its very brokenness provides a site for projection of ideas, for productive uncertainty, for experiment and for the invention of narratives. Perhaps T.S. Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land* offered, in a hugely different context, something similar in the line, ‘These Fragments I have shored against my ruins’ (Eliot 1990, p. 41). These possibilities, these fragments are all part of the appeal. The performance and other artistic practices marked in this book vary gloriously in their intention and their form. All have a degree of utopianism to them in that they hint at different ways of being in the world and engaging with the world’s materiality and its potential destruction. In this sense each of these projects has its own generative ecology, even if this ecology is short lived, only to be swiftly re-ruined. The field of ruin performance is replete with paradox and complexity, never more acutely evidenced than in Sarajevo’s ‘theatres under siege’. Here, under unspeakable conditions of death and destruction, theatre, often itself ruined, afforded opportunities for resilience, comradeship and a strange sense of familiarity during a period of time which was far from ordinary. In the two decades following the end of Balkans War a number of the key players remarked that peacetime failed to engender or recapture the depth and richness of feelings and creativity that conditions of extreme danger under siege had somehow generated. In a different context, Simon Ward, writing about ruination and poetics in the works of W.G. Sebald, reflects that ‘these are sites of broken narration,
realms where the imagination actively engages with, indeed transforms, the material environment’ (Ward 2006, p. 62).

In the opening chapter I suggested that the timeliness of thinking and puzzling over ruins was framed by the era of the Anthropocene and our consciousness of impending environmental disaster driven by human agency. At the completion of the volume such preoccupations remain as urgent and present as they ever were. However, today in the final weeks before this writing is dispatched to the publisher two more events of huge import cast long shadows upon my thoughts and writing about the nature of ruin and ruination. Britain’s decision to leave the European Union (a referendum in 2016) was confirmed unequivocally, but far from unanimously, by the General Election result of December 2019 which saw a Conservative government elected by a large majority on the platform of ‘Get Brexit done’. Only two months later the rapid global spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) resulted in extraordinary enforced changes in social life, economic activity and human behaviour in most countries across the world. At the time of writing the middle- and long-term consequences of this pandemic are unknown. Whilst the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU may seem a parochial concern compared to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, it nonetheless has momentous impact on what being European means both in very practical terms and as part of our collective imaginary. When the pandemic subsides, the UK decision to leave the EU will begin to reconfigure global political and economic relationships and the interactions we have with each other. In this context, if the idea and practice of a collaborative Europe is not exactly ruined it is most surely fragmented and seriously fractured.

Each of these events, both global in very different ways, would seem to shed a new and acute light on notions and experiences of ruination. As has been explained in the opening chapters this is a European book with European case studies and a very European sensibility on the part of the author who must live with and accept the consequences of this partiality. However each of these events are experienced and perceived it is difficult not to sense a feeling of severe disquiet about socio-political systems, structures and relationships which seem worryingly cleft and variously ruined. Regardless of whether this brokenness is to be welcomed as heralding more optimistic futures, or deplored as a catastrophic sign of end-times, our collective imaginary is inevitably engrossed and being formed—and re-formed—by these experiences. Whilst these global events have significant real-life impact on our worlds it is also hard not to view
them as having a metonymic and allegorical function in relation to the places and projects which have been the subject of this book. I conclude by returning to Benjamin and Beckett. The former found the allegory as a generative strategy for approaching objects, images and behaviours always as multivalent and polysemous. For Benjamin, the world of meaning is never one-dimensional and as an allegorist he finds meaning even in wreckage and ruin. His comment about their relationship, quoted earlier in the book, warrants reprising here. He writes that ‘Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things’ (Benjamin 1977, p. 178). As a last word it may seem perverse to turn to Beckett for a (slightly) upbeat note, but we might remind ourselves in closing that even Beckett, during his unbroadcast piece for radio (The Capital of the Ruins), proposed that the devastated French town of St-Lo offered an ‘inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again’ (Beckett 1986, p. 76). At their most startling, eccentric and compelling these ruin performances have offered their own ‘inkling’.

Note

1. Goat Island was an influential Chicago-based collaborative performance group, founded in 1987 which closed with a final performance of ‘The Lastmaker’ in 2009. Goulish was one of the founding members of the company.

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