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DOORS OF PARADISE

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Doors of Paradise

Michelangelo's description of Lorenzo Ghiberti's gilded bronze doors as the porta del paradiso reads at first like pretty generic praise, albeit that it comes from a reputable source on the subject of sculpture. To cite paradise as a measure is comparable to describing a work of art as 'heavenly' or 'divine': it mixes hyperbole with the pleasing ring, to modern ears, of something like camp. Less anachronistically, the implication that these baptistery gates offered access to paradise seems like a straightforward expression of the Renaissance principle that artistic genius is evidence of the godlike in human beings. 'Look upon what this man has done,' the phrase suggests, 'in craft how like angel, in intelligence how like a God.' In contemplating the greatness of this design, the theory goes, man's inherent divinity would be revealed to the citizens of Florence.

And yet Michelangelo's phrase conceals a hidden ambiguity. The gates of paradise are closed to the living and serve the basic function of denying to the quick and the undeserving dead the infinite happiness of proximity to God. If there were no walls, there would be no need for gates; without borders there would be no trespass against them. Ghiberti's reliefs make a promise about access to the truth and to happiness that neither they nor any work of art can fulfil. They don't grant access to paradise but obstruct it from the viewer.

The experience of heaven is by definition ineffable, a totalising perfection that obliterates the individual selfhood through which our experience of the world is mediated. And so, in the Paradiso, even the divinely appointed Dante is unable adequately to describe the appearance of God in heaven, which he describes as three bright circles of light the interaction of which he attempts briefly to understand before confessing, in C. H. Sisson's translation, that 'that was not a flight for my wings'. Poetry is like sculpture sufficient to describe the thresholds to good and evil but not to take us all the way through them. The sculpture and the poem provided the twin inspirations for Rodin's Gates of Hell which, while Ghiberti's gates to paradise were conceived for a church, were commissioned as the entrance to a planned Museum of Decorative Arts.

The closest thing to the caverns of hell that humanity has yet invented – besides museums of decorative art – might be the vast underground bunkers in which radioactive waste is interred. The principle behind these interventions into the geological landscape is disarmingly simple: fill them to the brim with world-ending quantities of nuclear material, brick up the door, throw away the key and make sure that no-one goes inside for the next 100,000 years. And so today's architects are faced with a dilemma comparable to Dante's, Ghiberti's and Rodin's but with an added complication: how do you communicate even the simplest message – of heaven or hell beyond – to cultures and intelligences that may no longer resemble our own? Turn it around: if humanity arrived on a planet and found a 75,000-year-old monument constructed by a technologically advanced civilisation, do you think we'd resist the temptation to open it up?

In advising people to stay away, Dante provided the doors to hell with a simple inscription: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* ('Abandon hope all ye who enter here'). Which is certainly catchy but seems unfair on anyone, happening to stumble upon the portal, who doesn't speak early-modern Italian. Rodin included the slogan but added a slew of figures caught in a catalogue of human excruciation to make the message one-hundred-per-cent clear even to those who didn't take that class at school. It seems inconceivable that any human being could mistake the symbolic meaning of Rodin's tortured figures, but it's not so hard now to imagine a future world which is populated by minds and bodies of a different order, in which humanity has integrated with, or been defeated by, artificial intelligences; or, given the everyday greater likelihood that humanity won't last as long as its nuclear by-products, a scenario in which sentient beings turn up on Earth looking for clues to what happened before the climate apocalypse/nuclear armageddon.

The upshot of the problem of how to signify artificial hell to the future was the 1993 research paper 'Expert Judgment on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant', which begins by noting the historic failure of previous attempts in the number of warnings against entry to burial grounds or sacred sites now proudly displayed in western museums. The authors recommend an extraordinary system of earthworks that would transform the landscape into an impassable bed of irregular spikes, a labyrinthine set of passages into which a visitor can enter but which narrow gradually until they cannot be taken any further and a series of information centres which attempt to communicate the gravity of the situation by reference to the stars. Proposals made before and since have focused on the creation of an allegorical myth that might endure through the generations, an arrangement of huge 'crystalline coffins' that would symbolise the death that lurks in the ground beneath and an experiment in climate engineering that, from the images attached to the proposal at least, would transform the site into a mountain range of brightly coloured, pyramidal geological forms.

These designs might be the closest that humanity has ever come to the gates that God created to separate the living from the lands of the dead. Although it's worth pointing out that, while we might have a good impersonation of hell down, we are some way yet from inventing a comparable paradise, although it's not difficult to foresee an ecologically devastated near-future in which the enclaves of the rich are protected from the rest by state-of-the art borders, walls and gates (upon which will be inscribed, perhaps, images of the spiritual delight from which the majority are disbarred). The work of Ghiberti and Dante was reclaimed as art, as distinct from symbolic aids in the pursuit of theological revelation and the righteous life, when the majority ceased to believe in heaven and hell. Perhaps, when the radioactivity of those waste processing sites has dissipated, civilisations henceforth might imagine these strange architectures in the desert simply to have been baubles with which humanity decorated its landscape, designs of purely aesthetic expression or fetish objects activated by rituals now lost to obscurity. It's not so hard to imagine a chipped fragment of these signs in some extra-terrestrial museum devoted to the rudimentary art of primitive lifeforms from the margins of the universe.

Ben Eastham is founding editor of The White Review, associate editor of ArtReview and was an associate editor of documenta 14. His writing has appeared in the London Review of Books, frieze, the New York Times and Mousse among many other publications, and he has written catalogue essays for artists including Ed Ruscha, Camille Henrot and John Gerrard. His first book, My Life as a Work of Art, co-authored with Katya Tylevich, was published in 2016, and he is the editor of The Worlds of Stephen Spender (Hauser & Wirth, 2018).

Exhibition Hours
Wednesday–Saturday
12pm–6pm

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