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*Skye Arundhati Thomas*

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# EXIT WOUNDS





**Skye Arundhati Thomas** is a writer and editor based in Mumbai. She writes for *e-flux*, *ArtReview*, *Frieze*, and *Artforum*, among others. Her work pays special attention to contemporary art, culture, and histories of the subcontinent.

A 1940 air raid over London broke open Virginia and Leonard Woolf's house at 52, Tavistock Square and Virginia, upon visiting the site, writes in her diary, "I could see a piece of my studio wall standing: otherwise rubble where I wrote so many books. Open air where we sat on so many nights, gave so many parties. All again litter, glass, black soft dust, plaster powder." A strong wind blows past as the Woolfs shift through scraps of furniture and torn books; Virginia only looks for her diaries. She adds, "But it's odd — the relief at losing possessions. I should like to start a life, in peace, almost bare — free to go anywhere."

A black and white photograph of the ruined house opened the show 'Virginia Woolf: Art, Life and Vision' at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 2014. It was placed next to a portrait of Woolf herself, a colour photograph by German portraitist Gisèle Freund, taken in 1939 just a year before the bombing. As curation had it, Woolf, dressed in a striped suit and white blouse, gazes at the remains of her house in the next photograph. She holds a cigarette in one hand, a book in the other, and the portrait is immaculately styled. Both photographs carry the same detail: a series of wall paintings specially painted by Woolf's sister, Vita Sackville-

West, splayed over the fireplace and mantel. The juxtaposition of the two photographs, writes curator Frances Spalding, "is a timely reminder to 21st century audiences that the veneer of civilisation is thin." It may be thin, but it is irresistible, and as for its ruination — perhaps even more so. The lure is in the neatly cleaved off wall, and the mutely hanging debris.

Three fragments of a severed open interior followed one another on a wall at Kolkata-based gallery Experimenter's recent show, 'Ground Zero', a solo presentation by Goan artist Sahil Naik. Tentatively labeled as versions of *Portraits of Home/Exit Wounds* (I, II, III), the work gives us three devastated rooms of a house: a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen. They are shelled opened carcasses of a house once alive — peeling walls; yellowing edges; and dust-covered, upturned furniture. Upon a sideboard across the dining table, a slumped over vase runs out its contents: the stems and petals of a dried-up bouquet of flowers. Like a Barthesian *punctum*, this detail ruptures the scene, as do the thinly painted green and blue flowers that decorate the surface of the vase. Something is remembered there, and something is lost. The nature of the ruin is more than its melancholy.

In 1953, Rose Macaulay published *Pleasure of Ruins*, a narrative history of the 'ruin lust' which took over the European imagination in the 18th century. Continuing on from Macaulay, in 2014 critic and writer Brian Dillon curated 'Ruin Lust' at the Tate Britain, London, showing how this was yet an undead fascination, carrying well into the 21st century. Dillon gathered work from the Renaissance to the present day. In Rachel Whiteread's *Demolished* (1996) series: the three tower blocks, from the Heygate estate in Central London, slowly disintegrate into a plume of thick smoke, and their ruination is at once ideological as it is physical. Ruin lust may be understood in conjunction with the German word *Ruinenwert* (literally: Ruin value), the idea that a building is specifically designed with its destruction in mind, so that once ruined, it still retains an aesthetic value. German architect Albert Speer, while planning for the 1936 Summer Olympics, first published the *Theory of Ruin Value*. At its heart is a malicious and inflated desire for legacy: Hitler hoped for such ruins to endure the Third Reich. However, as history has often shown us, a legacy often does little more than to reveal its folly.

In Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *The Ruins*

Left side image: Sahil Naik, *Portraits of Home / Exit Wounds* (Working Title) - II, Wood, terracotta bricks, ceramic tiles, sunboard, 14 x 8.5 x 12 inches, 2017. Image courtesy: Experimenter.



Sahil Naik, Installation View: *Portraits of Home / Exit Wounds (Working Title) - III* (detail), Wood, terracotta bricks, ceramic tiles, sunboard, 18 x 11.5 x 12 inches, 2017. Image courtesy: Experimenter.

*of Detroit* — a collection of photographs of the desolate and emptied out architecture of a post-industrial Detroit — we are given, in quick succession, photographs from the city's most famous historical sites. Most famous, of course, for their ruination. In a photograph of the living room of an apartment in a 1920s luxury-housing complex, Lee Plaza, a deco interior crumbles inward into a room, covering the floor with pieces of plaster. A knocked-over chair has its cushion torn open, its stuffing bursting out in spools. The high glamour is offered with a single detail: the dust-filled insides of an upturned piano, its machinations revealed as sculpture. Dillon writes of the photographs, which

were also in show at the Tate Britain, “[where] the ruination is real, and perhaps even permanent, but the images that are made of it are surely also the result of a specific, largely unconscious, desire: a fantasy according to which our modernity and modernism have decayed or been erased.”

The ruin is largely in the eye, and the frame, of its witness. But it is in the framing of the ruin that desire is founded — in the details chosen, or intentionally lost, by those that compose the ruin. Woolf, rummaging through the debris of her house, feels the freedom of lost possession. For her, the ruin is pure potential. In Naik's work, the ruin is in the detail of possessions still left behind: metal plates still

stacked over by the sink; a broken shelf precarious in a cabinet; an armchair with a missing blood-red cushion; streaking mud-marks on the dining room floor. The ruin is at once a slow decay as it is the presentation of an abrupt apocalypse: and it is in both that we found our desire.