

***Extreme Logistics for Disappearance* by Alessandro Rabottini**

When a sculpture comes into the world, regardless of its size, big or small, it takes up some space. Whether draped over a plinth or sitting on a square, a sculpture is a thing that has been added to the world until it is, perhaps, destroyed; and until that happens (if it happens at all) the thing in question will occupy a certain amount of space.

Space is also taken up by the void around the piece when it is shown in a gallery; and some additional space is needed for its crate while in storage. An entire existence of weights and measures.

The opposite can be said of *A Retrospective View of the Pathway*, a rare example of a sculpture created by eliminating one thing – a real thing, and functional, too – from the world. That thing is a dormant Hawker Siddeley Dominie T1 military plane, which the artist Roger Hiorns buried in 2016 beneath farmland near Ipswich, Suffolk, in the east of England. This was the first time that he removed a military passenger aircraft from the world and hid it from sight, underground, once and for all. He would do the same on two further occasions: in 2017 in Dolní Břežany, in the Czech Republic, and in 2021 in Haarlem, the Netherlands, with the intention of continuing to disseminate further submerged jets over the years around the world.

This is as nothing if we think of the multitude of military planes that crowd the skies above humankind. But this is a type of nothingness that brings with it, we can imagine, extreme procedures – be they institutional, logistical or political – in order to secure disappearance. Nothingness, at times, requires a lot of work, while destruction can take but a few seconds, which is the lesson that was keep teaching us, without us actually ever getting our heads around it.

Similarly reduced to almost nothing is the perception of any scale of life – be it human, animal, or plant – when seen from above, from the cockpit of a jet. From up in the sky, the landscape below is just an image; a simplified, flattened composition of fields and rivers, no longer a pulsating expanse of homes and hopes.

Killing, in the end, demands a certain level of abstraction.

Indeed, the trajectory drawn by modern military technology can be understood as an ascent towards detachment, clarity and distance: the more acute and surgical the visibility, the more radical the physical and spatial separation between attacker and attacked. The necessary proximity of bodies in ground wars has been made obsolete by air attacks, and with today's drone strikes the aggressor need not even be in the same country as the victim.

We can now speculate on the lives that the Hawker Siddeley Dominie T1 in question monitored from above without even fully comprehending their physical manifestation, just as we can no longer see its solid, submerged metal contours. With his inverted monument to unseen destruction – a statue not erected but sunken – Roger Hiorns brings to a close a project that began with Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein, and which conceptual artists turned into a paradigm from the '60s onwards: that of an art made possible by the vanishing of objects and things. An art of distance and of instructions. In 1968, Lawrence Weiner devised the specifications for making a work of art by taking out a portion of wall (*A 36" x 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall*), a procedure that Gordon Matta-Clark would elevate to compositional bravura a few years later, when he began to reinvent sculpture by excising portions of buildings.

Something was being taken out of the world rather than added to it.

In 1970, John Baldessari got rid of almost fifteen years of figurative and abstract works by incinerating them at a crematorium in San Diego, California. Baldessari's *Cremation Project* and Hiorns's *A Retrospective View of the Pathway* share a dual, almost oppositional, funereal aesthetic: bodies that are not buried must be cremated. In both cases, they must be removed from the space of the living.

That the removal of matter is an action intrinsic to sculpture has been true for centuries – or at least until Modernism began to argue that to obtain a sculpture one could add matter as well as eliminate it. In fact, before Modernism brought assemblage into the language of sculpture, plastic forms were carved out, made to emerge by means of subtraction.

With Surrealism, Dada and all the other movements that came in their wake, the internal economy and means of sculpture were turned literally inside out: things being added on top of other things, rather than matter being eliminated. One can then assert that *A Retrospective View of the Pathway* is a rather classical sculpture for an age of escalating surveillance.

In its silenced magniloquence, this work embodies another postulate of conceptual art: that of existing more in the receivers' minds than in their eyes, functioning not as a visual thing amongst visible things but instead as a displaced, immaterial, mental image. Its being *elsewhere*, in an inaccessible place, is the only semantic bomb left for it to drop.

Out of such an extensive field of absence, what is left for us to see is a film, an edited documenting of the burial of the aircraft in Ipswich. This does not feel like a ceremonial burial: no solemn words are spoken, no prayers sung, just heavy machines and earth moved around, dislocated like the few figures in the landscape. A rugged ceremony of handling.

From a certain distance, the camera records the deposition of the plane in the cruciform hole that was excavated for it. The end of an object that used to hurtle across the sky and now lies so patiently impotent.

Soon, the camera moves inside the aircraft, inspecting first the passenger seats and, immediately afterwards, the cockpit. Its movements are non-authorial, they feel dispassionate and functional, with that investigative practicality which is required when entering an abandoned site for the first time. A similar, detached scrutiny can be found in images of medical investigations.

From the windows, the restricted view over an anaemic landscape, washed out, almost calcified; the bones of a landscape rather than its flesh.

We are now outside again, witnessing the entombment of a nigh-on unrecognisable object, the repositioning of the soil that had been dug up, poured onto this metal mechanism as if to seal it off from the outside world, the sun and the breeze banished from this flattened mausoleum.

All this happens against the metallic, at times cavernous noise of machinery and engines; on occasion the contextual sound absorbs and emits the recording of the digestive process of the human body. The take-off is gone, the landing is gone, too, and there is no more horizon, no more turbulence. Soon there will be no more landscape, either. Everything happens inside now, everything gurgles.

To memorialise this burial without monuments, Hiorns suppressed the colours from the footage: there is neither grass nor sky, as if even photosynthesis had come and gone. The clouds are darker than the trees because a digital filter has been applied, simulating the photographic effect of solarisation or, more properly, pseudo-solarisation. That which, at the dawn of photography, in the era of the daguerreotype, had been the product of the direct intervention of the sun, with modern photography has become a process that takes place in the absence of natural light, inside the darkroom. It now happens on a computer screen, that source of digital brightness upon which these very words are being put together.

If *A Retrospective View of the Pathway* can be described as a dim epic of inversion, it is because the sun has been exiled not only from the recessed grave of the aircraft but also from the only visible memory of it still available to us.

I find myself thinking about what we could call a contradiction, but which could, perhaps more productively, be understood as a form of tension: that between the efforts which this whole undertaking must have required, on the one hand, and such a muted, almost devitalised document, on the other. Maybe an exhausted memory is the best way to commemorate a decommissioned vehicle of power – intricate revenge for its forever-lost vigour. I convince myself, though, that this contradiction, this tension, is proof positive of how *A Retrospective View of the Pathway* is a sculpture made for an internal space; a space that is infinite and not subject to complex logistics, a site as remote as an individual's imagination.

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