

Man in the Planet

'At any rate, eternity brings about the dissolution of belief in temporal histories, empires, revolutions, and counter-revolution—all becomes ephemeral and in a sense unreal, even the universe loses its reality.' (Robert Smithson, 1967)

Man in the Planet brings together a series of photos, sculptures, installations and videos in an exhibition that reconfigures the space of the Viafarini DOCVA into a sort of sinking and accumulation, a movement in the direction of irretrievable waste. The show takes its form from the peculiar architecture of industrial derivation that characterizes the building, once a plant for the production of tramcars. Cobbing has interpreted the space in a way that makes it resemble the moribund scenery of *Eraserhead*, David Lynch's first full-length film in which all logic disappears to make room for a series of symbolic metaphors. In this surreal film, a celluloid nightmare as it has been described by many, one of the characters is in fact called the Man in the Planet.

The route through the exhibition is strewn with casts of human limbs, looking almost as if they were trapped in the architecture, which present the body as a trace, as a vestige of what it had once been. They are works that allude to the concept of entropy and, underlining the extent to which earthly material is irreversibly dispersed, they give rise to a definitive blurring of the boundaries between the body and the landscape and put any possibility of meaning on ice. *Untitled* (2006) is a life-size cast of the artist's own figure in concrete that offers glimpses of shreds of his clothing, the laces of his Adidas shoes, scraps of denim, the buttons of his shirt. This is a work emphatically influenced by what is called the 'Fiorelli method'. In fact Giuseppe Fiorelli was a distinguished Neapolitan archaeologist who around the middle of the 19th century, given the job of organizing the excavations in Pompeii, had realized that it would be possible to make casts of the victims of the eruption by pouring liquid plaster into the cavity left in the ash by their bodies. The image of the impressions left by all those bodies, empty vessels that over time had accumulated liquids, debris and dust, those crowds, those seething and now filthy masses of humanity, has inspired Cobbing to run a drainpipe through the head of the figure, following the same course as the line of its vision but at the same time concealing its mouth and nose, as if its sensory faculties had in some way been displaced. Formally, the artist considers this work to be a sort of 'body as installation'. *Untitled*, previously shown at the Network Centre for Contemporary Art at Aalst in Belgium and the Freud Museum in London, is always installed in a narrow space, between columns or in a doorway. Spaces that have a liminal quality, as the doorway is an opening in space and the columns, in addition to their structural function, are a sort of punctuation of space. So that the cast of the artist's body, squeezed into these gaps, seems to emerge from the architecture, as if it had been generated by it, or looks as if it had just been buried in it, for disinterment sometime in the next millennium. And in *Excavation*, the performance of which Cobbing himself is the protagonist, the repeated and almost obsessive action reveals the frustration and futility of an incontestably useless effort. Cobbing, with a self-referential gesture and a solipsistic attitude, chips away ceaselessly at his own head encased in concrete, seeking metaphorically to strip away the layers of the self but without getting anywhere. In fact he modifies the shape of his face without succeeding in breaking through the material, and in doing so underlines the act of taking apart and putting back together, pursuing form as well as the formless.

'I am interested in the transition between form and formless. In my work I want to address the idea of entropy, the idea that things assume a temporary form before decomposing once again. Form has something fluid: nothing stays the way it is, everything becomes dissolved and then dispersed', Cobbing has stressed in an interview.

The concept of entropy, borrowed directly from the second law of thermodynamics, tells us that it is much easier to lose energy than to gain it. Every change entails an uncontrolled production of energy that cannot be utilized. Entropy brings chaos into circulation, opening up to infinity and to the possible to the extent to which the amount of suspended energy is assumed in a new form with a maximum power of subsequent structuring. Entropy as waste, as excess, as debris therefore. *Moon Walker* (2009) shows us the artist walking, under a pewter sky flecked with clouds as white as chalk, along the bleak and desolate shore between Berwick and Holy Island, near Newcastle, while the most recent work is a product of the artist's residence in Afghanistan. Bamiyan and Berwick: two different places, distant from one another geographically as well as socio-politically, in which Cobbing spent time over the course of 2009. The artist takes both these realities as a pretext and documents them with sophisticated references to the Land Art of the sixties and in particular the work of Robert Smithson. Cobbing's premise is that if an idea of landscape or of an image of the landscape can exist, it can only rest on a dialectical tension that cannot be summarized or abbreviated except through the enunciation of its process. The existence of the place can only be demonstrated in its absence, in the non-place in which the proofs and clues resulting from the constituent entropic process are examined.

First of all, Berwick-upon-Tweed, the northernmost town in England, located on the border with Scotland. Between concrete blockhouses left over from the Second World War and ruins of fortresses from the Elizabethan era, Berwick is defined by its defensive architecture. For centuries it was the theatre of endless battles and border disputes: it suffices to think that in the years between 1147 and 1482 alone it changed hands between Scotland and England a total of thirteen times. *Clapper Tongue* (2009), the bronze cast of a bust with the functions of a bell, alludes to the obsolescence of the disused bell tower on the northern walls of Berwick, where the tolling of a bell used to warn of an imminent enemy attack on the border.

With *Moon Walker*, a series of two videos made in 2009, in a sort of spreading out of the location in time, Cobbing walks along cold and inhospitable beaches and retraces his own steps just to reverse and erase the footprints he has left in the sand. His forward progress is a way of trying to go backwards. In the first video he looks as if he is walking forwards but is in fact furtively cancelling out his own tracks, rewinding their entropic dispersal on the sand. In the second he starts out instead from the centre and simply walks in a decreasing circle, while a fixed camera take records the progressive erasure of his footsteps until the beach is left free of any trace. The cruel wind and bitter cold of the winter add an element of challenge to the filming. These actions of reversal call to mind the accounts of ruin and entropy, notions seen as variables that cannot be eliminated, made by Robert Smithson in *The Monuments of Passaic*. In 1967, in fact, the American artist published an essay halfway between travel writing and the short story in the magazine *ArtForum* in which he diagnoses the phenomenon of entropic drift with surprising precision. Smithson describes, with objective skill, a scene in which a sand box that is perfectly divided into sections with black sand and white sand is gradually made to turn grey by having a child

run around it hundreds of times clockwise. He then has the child repeat the same action anticlockwise and instead of returning the sand to its original division between the two colours this mixes it even more thoroughly, resulting in 'a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy'.

This account is the basis of Cobbing's reflections on the temporal state of materials and the absurdity of the performance itself. It leads him to a redefinition of the landscape, which is transformed from the product of a model of representation encoded in advance, or 'previsualised' from the outside, into the effect of a performance in 'real time' between the subject and the space. The performance in this case represents an end and at the same time a new beginning and does not refer to anything but itself. It circumscribes what it describes and simultaneously contains it. Accompanied by sounds recorded live, the beach returns to a sort of limbo ready to take on the meaning of new metaphors.

The *Bamiyan Mirror* series (2009) consists of a sequence of photos of the niches that used to house the two statues of Buddha at Bamiyan and creates a sort of ambiguity about the nature of the image. It testifies to the dual experience of reality: a direct and concrete one, and another delayed and made more forceful within the photographic image. Cobbing was invited to be artist in residence at the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Kabul from April to May 2009. The interest stirred by some television documentaries on the blowing up of the two monumental Buddhas by the Taliban prompted him to make a trip to Bamiyan. The shots and pictures of the destruction of the two centuries-old sculptures with dynamite can be seen as a glaring example of the sort of sordid theatrical imagery of conflict favoured by the mass media, which essentially present, for tactile and immediate perception, what Baudrillard called the 'pornographic' side of war.

Bamiyan: just over 200 kilometres from the capital Kabul, it lies on the Silk Road, a trade route that once linked the markets of China with those of Central and South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Here in March 2001, to the unanimous dismay of the international community, the Taliban blew up two one-thousand-five-hundred-year-old statues of Buddha in compliance with the iconoclastic edict issued a few months earlier by Mullah Omar and supported by the minister of culture Qudratullah Jamal. Following an extremely rigid interpretation of Islamic precepts that forbade the presence in the country of any form of art that bore witness to its idolatrous and pre-Islamic past, they reduced the two statues to a heap of rubble, literally tearing them from the rock out of which they had been carved. In a landscape that overwhelms the human, a prodigious hybrid between art and nature, one of the last pieces of evidence of an intermediate passage between a chthonic level and the ramification of hypotheses and histories was smashed to smithereens.

The story of Bamiyan had begun in 327 BCE when Alexander the Great arrived there. He had subjugated the Persian empire, put down revolts by satraps and bloodily suppressed the plots of his deputies; shortly afterwards his army, exhausted by desert marches and years of combat, would in fact come close to mutiny, forcing him to return to Babylon. But the expedition left behind it Greco-Macedonian garrisons and kingdoms which allowed Europe to make its way into Asia. Four centuries later merchants travelling through Afghanistan, which at that time went by the name of Oxiana, found temples consecrated to the god of fire, a cult of Persian origin, but adorned with typically Greek motifs, such as Corinthian capitals and garlands supported by little winged figures of Eros. Greek too were the letters of the carved inscriptions, and Greek the drapery of

the statues of divine kings. Later Bamiyan was seen as a mystical place by the Buddhist monks who, expelled from India, made their way along the Silk Road. Fifteen centuries ago, during the period in which the two Buddhas were carved, the valley housed a large monastic community and was part of the Indo-Greek civilization. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who passed through around the year 630, described the region as a flourishing Buddhist centre, 'with more than ten monasteries and more than a thousand monks' living as hermits in small caves cut out of the rock and decorated with religious statues and paintings. Now Bamiyan has become a valley of ghosts. From above it looks like an expanse of yellow bounded by a ridge riddled with holes and, at a small distance from one another, two empty sockets: the niches that for centuries housed the two stone Buddhas, hieratic guardians of the valley. Called 'the Small Buddha and the Big Buddha', they were 35 and 53 metres high respectively, the largest representations of Gautama Buddha in the Gandhara style that existed in the world. As well as inventing the iconography of the Buddha in human form, standing or seated, and of his gestures (the four mudras typical of the Enlightened One), the Gandhara School introduced the use of stucco and the bas-relief along with a particular attention to anatomy and the drapery of the clothing, which closely resembles the models of Hellenistic sculpture. In that large area of desert, crossed by the caravans of nomads, the two colossi were carved into the rock, a pale rock as porous as tuff that changes colour with the sun and the weather, traversed by streaks of yellow, pink and red. The gesture that they made was the typical *Abhaya mudrā* that signifies 'reassurance' and symbolizes the protection offered by the Buddha to his followers and the dispelling of fear.¹

The *Bamiyan Mirror* series (2009) is a work on William Cobbing's wanderings through this age-old and multi-layered landscape. The method of photographic individuation chosen by the artist acts as a resounding chamber for the boundless and scattered effects of an increase in entropy. The niches that once framed the two Buddhas become as evocatively resonant as a shadow and underline their absence. The perceptual contradiction, after their demolition, lies in the evidence that they have become even more present as vestiges. The photographic image no longer contains a predetermined 'closed landscape', but reveals an 'open landscape' of which, given its refractoriness to any rational synthesis, all that can be conveyed is the mass of traces, of temporal stratifications, the partial and discontinuous sequence of photographic impressions. The time that passes is inevitably irreversible, and the concept of entropy is founded precisely on the irreversibility of this process. The photograph, all photography, is by its nature a loss of energy. It discloses an instant that has vanished forever and always exists in the past. It is a fragment of something that is essentially transient. In a nutshell it is an entropic residue. So Cobbing decided to make the subject of his photographs the image of the

¹It is thought that the two Buddhas were originally decorated with gold and jewels and dated from the 6th century, at the time when the empire of the Indo-European tribe of the Hephthalites or White Huns was at its peak. A history made up of hybridizations, exchanges and crossbreeding that ended in the 8th century with the arrival of Islam. In the 10th century the two statues escaped the destruction that followed the conquest of Afghanistan by Mahmud of Ghazni, as well as that wreaked by the last great Mogul emperor Aurangzeb and then by the ruler of Iran Nadir Shah who, after many centuries of relative calm, had cannonballs fired at the statues, causing damage of little significance. In fact the Muslim invaders erased Buddhism from the valley but spared the statues, limiting themselves to disfiguring the larger of the two, which lost its eyes and nose.

niches reflected in the surface of a mirror, with the precise aim of emphasizing their quality as a mirage. In a local bazaar he bought a mirror that he carried with him wherever he went, stopping occasionally to photograph the reflected image of the two empty spaces. 'The mirror is both the physical mirror and the reflection [...] it is a concept and abstraction [...], a displacement', wrote Robert Smithson. Cobbing propped it up between poplar trees, against rocks and road signs; he set it on the ground in cultivated fields or on heaps of gravel at the sides of roads. In the reflected image we glimpse just fragments of the niches or details of the scaffolding that shores up their unstable empty cavities like a pair of spectres. In a now devastated and erased landscape, the pictures contextualize them amidst the life of the local people and their daily routines, displacing their conventional optical qualities. The photographic survey organizes its action by indexing a repetition of many instantaneous pauses that aim to suspend the flow of recordable data. The lens also frames the mosque with its turquoise minaret, a pair of oxen ploughing a field, the polluted waters of the river that runs through the town, advertising posters, the stalls of a market. Every destruction of an object generates new images, other forms and objects. From the privileged viewpoint of the stretch of level ground on the edges of the town, between the sheer cliffs of sandstone and the snow-clad peaks of the Hindu Kush, the two empty niches appear on the ridge of the mountain like gigantic imprints on an epic scale. The Buddhists say that the Buddha is not his statue, Bruno Latour reminds us in *Iconoclasm*, and here the empty space is now filled by the absence of its statues. But the void is the very principle of Buddhism, which ironically now finds its true dogma in nothing. And so the images that the Taliban wanted to annihilate have now become even stronger and more present.

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