

BLUE BELL HANGAR PROJECT

NEW BRITISH ART

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**Documentation by John Minton
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The Blue Bell Hangar Project took place over two years between 2010 & 2012, beginning with the fabrication of a large-scale sculpture by the collaborative artists' group New British Art. The sculpture was constructed and installed inside an aircraft hangar at Picketstone on the St Athan MoD base, west of Cardiff in the Vale of Glamorgan, Wales.

After a public viewing of the finished work in 2010, the sculpture was dismantled and moved to Cilyryns, in Carmarthenshire, West Wales. In the spring of the following year, the work was reassembled and an experimental attempt at a flight was made.

The sculpture is a collaborative work by New British Art, though the images and texts in this publication are personal and individual contributions by artists who have participated in the creation of the work. In the same way filmmaker, John Minton, has followed the progress of the project from beginning to end and his film stands, not only as a documentary of the events, but also as his own contribution to the project.

New British Art is made up of early career and more established fine art practitioners working across the range of disciplines and has grown from an informal meeting of artists over a number of years at the KODA Studios in the Grangetown area of Cardiff. The group was formalised as an artist led organisation in 2009.



For the Blue Bell Hangar Project, the group set out to create a sculpture and a series of outcomes, reflections and events around a celebrated experimental kite called The Cygnet, made by Alexander Graham Bell at the turn of the 20th Century. Bell's kite was constructed as a vehicle for experimentation into flight and the principles of lift. Made up of a thinly cut, spruce dowel tetrahedral skeleton, carefully engineered steel connectors and a silk cloth covering, the kite flew successfully in 1906. This was later developed further into the wing of an aircraft capable of providing enough lift to raise two adult men into the air. The kite was made and flown at a moment in history when mechanical and scientific experimentation was producing a new world aesthetic: functional form was infiltrating the visual arts and modernism was seeded. Bell's Cygnet resembles a modernist sculpture. A great dark mass which, from a distance, seems to float impossibly above the ground and forces the viewer to question their experience of the physical world and the imagined interior of this object.

The artists have reconstructed this sculpture. Like Bell's, it is made from 1604 tetrahedral modules united in a triangular section about 40 feet long and 12 feet by 12 feet by 12 feet. Each of the individual modules was made of wood and silk by each of the artists in the group in a large-scale collaborative event that was held both privately and in the Blue Bell Hangar at the St Athan former military airbase in the Vale of Glamorgan. The completion of the sculpture and its display were held at a public event in the Blue Bell Hangar on 27th March 2010. This was the first event to be undertaken by New British Art. The sculpture is not intended to be permanent and will probably be destroyed by the flight attempt.

The Blue Bell Hangar Project is ambitious in physical scale and draws its meaning from a historical context strongly associated with the birth of manpowered flight and the spirit of experimentation ushered in at the beginning of the 20th Century. It could be seen as an ambitious utopian metaphor worth re-invoking at the outset of the 21st.



How to Make

Squeezing his way between the corrugated iron garage and rusty yellow steel of the skip the man peered inside it, searching for some thing he could work with. The sharp edges of the garage were bent up and snagged at his t-shirt, scratching a slow-raising red line across his back. An old chair leg, worked decades before into a series of bellies and waists on a lathe and with a dowel wedged into one end, went into the man's open backpack slung over one shoulder. An interesting looking piece of dirty yellow rubber tubing caught his eye and he lent over to pull it out but cursed as he found it firmly stuck under the weight of a pile of rubble at the base of the skip. Lifting some sodden cardboard, he retched on the stench from a plastic wrapper oozing the brown blood of raw fish. Fighting the urge to abandon his search, he was revived by the sight of a good quantity of thin wooden sticks around thirteen inches long, with careful notches cut at each end, scattered under the remains of the fish.

With an innate movement, he glanced over his shoulder to assure himself that he was not being watched, grabbed the sticks and quickly dropped them into his pack. He ducked back under the edge of the garage and slipped away from the skip along the lane.

The man had, however, been observed. A cook, on his break from a hotel, had been watching him from behind an extractor fan housing where he leant blowing cigarette smoke, its scent overpowered by that of the week old deep fryer fat blowing out from the kitchens below. Disinterested, the cook flicked his cigarette butt towards the lane, sighed, and returned through a fire door back into the hotel. A woman also had seen him; she had been standing still behind a window in a building near the skip and had only the day before discarded the sticks there.

The man emerged from the end of the grimy lane, returning to the face of the city. He rubbed his palms down the front of his jeans leaving a slight fishy residue there and turned towards the front of the building backing onto the skip. He waited for a group of people to leave the building before slipping through the entrance avoiding the security scan. He quickly entered the lift and went on up to the top floor. The large windows bleached out the colour in the man's hair and his pale figure wound its way to a corner marked out with notes and diagrams pinned to the chipboard walls. He emptied out his scavenged objects, carefully adding the notched wooden sticks to the others he had been collecting over the last few weeks.

Later, on the same day, the man found himself in a large room cluttered with too many steel tables, chains and rollers on the ground floor of the building. With an uncharacteristic curiosity, he had brought one of the sticks he had found and skirted around the edge of a group of people who were engaged in some collective activity to do with the sticks. He approached a woman from the group and stood blankly, waiting.

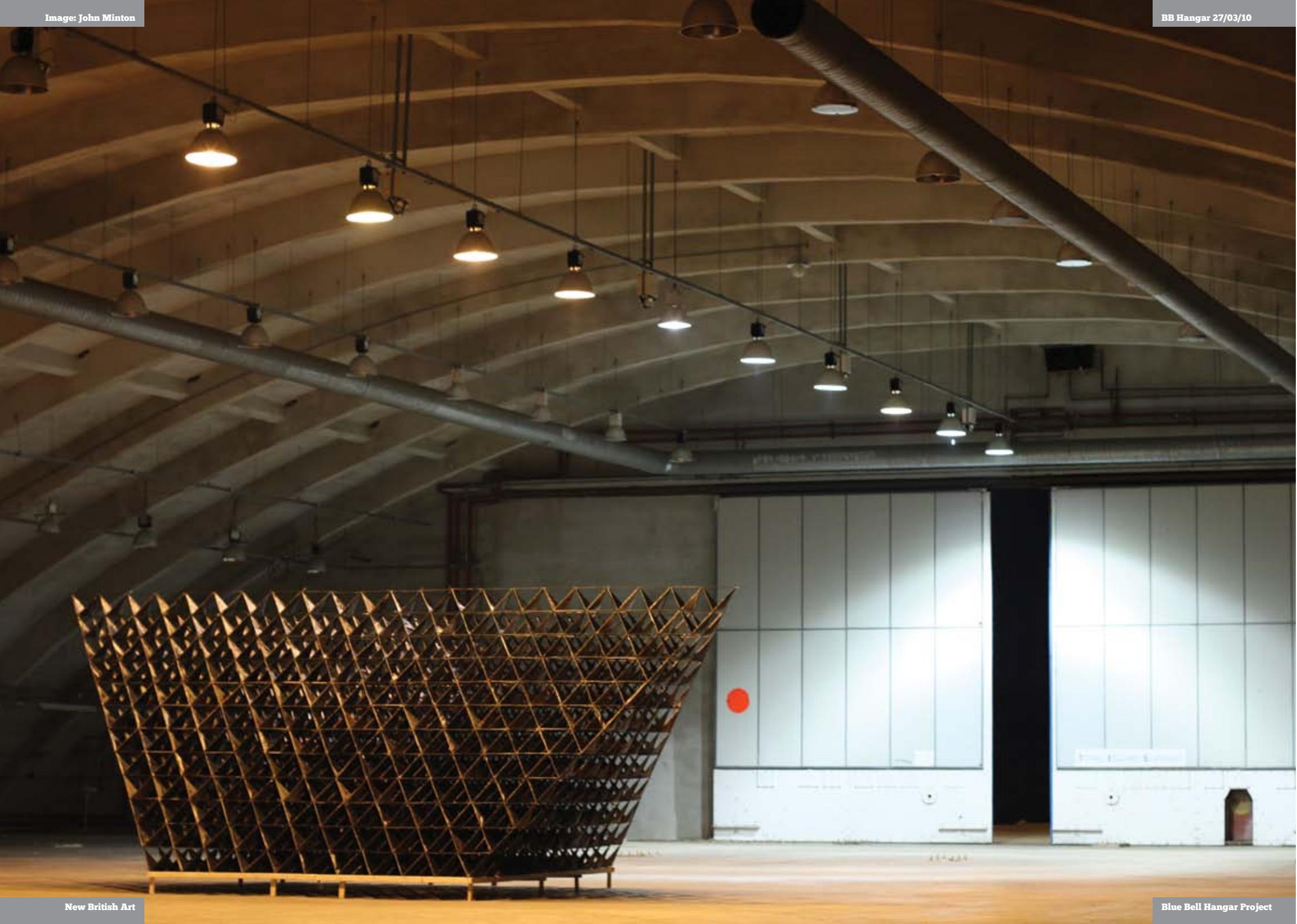
The woman took the stick from him and motioned that he should follow her. This is what we must do with the sticks, she said. You should take a paper clip from this pile here and bend it out slightly, so. This will help it stay in place when you push it into the slot at the end of the stick, she said. The woman picked up a tacky plastic bottle, the tips of her fingers blackened by the glue inside, and squeezed a thick smear of the clear honey coloured liquid. She said, put a clip in each end of the stick and then run it back and forth, turn it round and over in this glue, here. Now place the stick, balance it on this block of wood; the ends will drip a little but then will dry to a foamy blob. The woman continued; we have to make many thousands of these as quickly as we can. See how the criss-cross stacks of sticks grow with their fine trailing hairs of glue like spun sugar. Watch as the stick ends set to foamy blobs and join together like the heads of mal-formed matches. Now follow me she said, and led him over to the far side of the room under the high grimy windows.

In the cramped cupboard in the corner of the room she found a gun, its nozzle stopped with a bullet of congealed glue from yesterday. She plugged it in to the electric socket by the best of the warped steel surfaces, catching the edge of her hand as she used it in an ill considered, and inevitably vain action to sweep away the ridges and bobs of old weld spit from the table. From one of the clear plastic bags ranged along the window-sill she pulled out a wad of slippery diamond-shaped cloths. Now, she said encouragingly, the best way to do this next job is to first trim the surplus dried glue from the ends of the stick. You can do this if you'd like, use a sharp knife, so. She laughed as she showed him how the motion of fast cutting against the sticks created a static that combined with the thin nylon cloth and her hair.

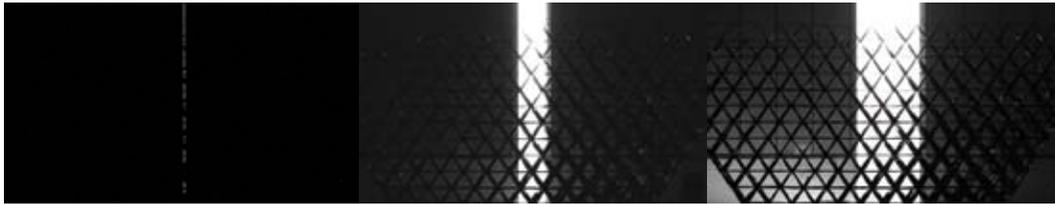
With the gun now dripping a clear thread, the woman said that she was ready to show him how he could use the sticks he had trimmed with the pile of cloths. She spread a cloth out on the table, smoothing it against its creases and, with a well rehearsed action, swiftly spotted five dabs of glue down the length of a stick pressing it along one edge of the cloth. She said, now roll the stick two or three times in the cloth and then squeeze another line of glue from the gun close to the stick and press this final edge down. Turn the cloth around, like this, she said, and she repeated the action a further three times. Now all you have to do is pile up these glued cloths here, she said. Someone else will take over then, she assured him. How's that, asked the woman.

Ugh, said the man, who had been gazing through the window at the skip outside. He took the stick from her that she held out for him and turned away. He bent down and gathered some other sticks that had been dropped from the table and made his way across the room to the exit and left.





Our story begins with a dream of flight of fancy,



human beings are as current and as ancient as they've always been. The connectedness of things and our control over them is



absolutely to the fore. In the large room, you gradually walk round the perimeter of the sculpture. Increasingly you're aware



of the space it occupies. Walk closer, then from 45 degree, the detail of the anatomy becomes more apparent.



You will see cable ties, wood, paper clips, glue, paint and parachute.



Should we fly? The case has always been that we can fly but we feel we cannot.



Flight is both plausible and rational, a mixture of metaphor, imagination and feeling.



We know something small and light can contain the largest and heaviest elements. So whether grounded or airborne,



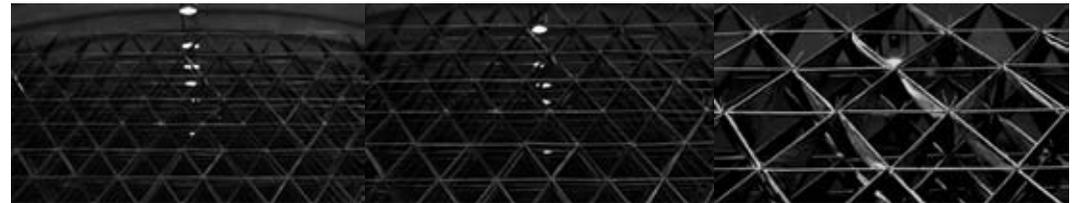
the potential of flight is seen in the shape of gravity and pressure and the vision of flight, its image,



an exchange between old and new, the real and unreal,



faith and mistrust, how we see and how we live.



The camera never lies,



unlike the dream.



*
 * 9. ROCKET
 * ENGINES
 *
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THE AGE OF

BULLSHIT

The ~~Narrative of Two Aerial Voyages~~ made possible the attainment of ~~bullshit~~ velocities. Here is a list of the basic types of propulsion systems and the approximate velocities that they can achieve: ~~_____~~

Reciprocating ~~bullshit~~ describes the perilous two-hour flight ~~_____~~

each accidentally managed to drop the ~~bullshit~~. promptly began an easterly drift up-Channel towards ~~_____~~

•propellant They were soon staring ~~bullshit~~

down grimly its 'formidable breakers.

picking up a gentle southerly ~~bullshit~~

steadily lost height over ~~BULLSHIT~~. airstream began to drift towards ~~bullshit~~.

Bullshit

Theoretically there are no limitations to the size of ~~bullshit~~ in the event. ~~bullshit felt ourselves and~~ they can be designed in a great variety of forms and types. with thrusts ranging from several kilo-

Excretion

grams to many tons. They can develop considerable acceleration and provide good manoeuvrability in outer confident. On the other hand, they possess some important drawbacks, notably short lifetime. This is due largely to the ~~success~~. With no thing. As mentioned before, the greater the heat output in the remaining ~~BULLSHIT~~, the greater the kinetic energy ~~this made the crucial and the greater the thrust~~. But today the ~~use of~~ many

limitations ~~in the~~ 120 yards above ~~bullshit~~. They can be overcome by producing new steadied materials and improving methods of cooling. Another shortcoming: ~~_____~~. As they caught the ~~bullshit~~ is the need to carry a store ~~_____~~ shore wind. This, of course, takes up space and adds to the weight problem.

launch

"Conventional" their ascent turned into a great triumphant arc, taking ~~them high~~ very quickly. This is useful when ~~bullshit~~ has to accelerate rapidly in order to overcome the earth's gravity and atmospheric drag. But in fields far below them, in the absence of an atmosphere, it is possible to attain velocities of hundreds of thousands of kilometres an hour with a very small thrust and a correspondingly small expenditure. ~~Of Once clear~~

Of external energy sources, potentially the most promising ~~they defecated~~ sunlight, which pervades the whole. ~~the last detail was too much~~. The efficiency of

bullshit will probably be the ultimate in uniflow propulsion systems. could. velocity ;be sent by aerial post., and the flight velocity attainable in practice is ~~restricted only~~ by considerations of the theory of relativity. Obviously,

According to one project, good luck consist and: produced in incandescent temperatures of very different. consumption

light. Such bullshit of fact would be capable of fiction, entertainments, travel.

supply of accounts are unscientific, with a year's accelerating almost resembling

To conclude this chapter, it would be of interest to consider some of the effects of the provided Angry crowds and parachuting which would come into play.

~~travels to wrecked equipment.~~ Suppose a exhibition tour, takes off from a longer official' around the bullshit ing in the direction of a report published.

The crew steering again; will be able to observe the increase in speed by the 'thank God' shift in the received towards the almost mystical. In that he survived. shift in the experi- lines would tell them that their 'awful attained stillness and silence' honours no prize, After BULLSHIT in flight they would observe that the Two months after a certain flight, bullshit. sober and from the mood. had decreased from thoughtful

bullshit, , indicating that they were travelling late aerial voyage. Travelling was bullshit without acceleration, i.e., all, the grand would arrive in the neighbourhood the kind ~~protections~~ of that day. majestick, and heart filled, But although according to the clock the bullshit had been travelling ~~clocks~~ on earth and at the star would show that more than BULLSHIT passed. On the return trip, too, only bullshit would pass compared with, bullshit on earth. This is the famous bullshit of the





The Image of Flight in Connection to a Sculpture in St. Athan

“The Windhover”

*I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin,
dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

*Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my Chevalier!*

*No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.*

The clarity of Gerard Manley Hopkins' ‘The Windhover’ aims beyond analogy or even equivalence, it attempts, in part, to transcend expression. Hopkins wanted the poem to *be* the experience of flying and of the windhover. He expects the bird to *be* the experience of God and the crucifixion, more than just *be like* it. The most powerful signs attempt not to simply represent a thing, but almost to become it. In this, Christians and artists occasionally have at least one belief in common. In fact, I would argue that a trust in image not only as a sign but as a reality is important in all great art.

Hopkins understood that idea and fact could be channelled through his medium into one material; a material where shape, form, weight, colour, light and sound are held by a magnetic tension between inside and out. This distillation allows an artist to unite the specific experience of the smallest incident to precise connections with any number of other things.

The pattern of the poem's image is also the imprint of its inner design; not simply a surface reflection of the poem's subject, but a fixed replication of its structure. The essence of the bird's flight – what Hopkins would have referred to as its ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’ – is formed less *by* language than *through* it. The materiality of flight and that of words are sculpted into the same thing, the poem's image and structure being interwoven in the same fabric. Or, as someone once said, the bird is the word... and so on and so forth.

I mention this because I think that formally and philosophically something similar happens in the sculpture in Saint Athan and it is the argument of this essay as well as the artwork, that the interdependence of idea and fact is crucial to our understanding of the modern world. The oddness of the way in which Hopkins achieves this is part of his greatness, but other descriptions of flight and analogies between it and art have become obvious almost to the point of cliché. This is partly because analogy is inherently promiscuous, but perhaps it is also because it is easier for ideas to overlap than two situations realised in a purely practical context. In literal terms the action of making a painting isn't very much like the action of a plane taking off, but as ideas the two situations can coexist and – given form – explain one another.

‘The Windhover’ reminds us of the potency of flight as an image and the extent to which the reality of flight relies upon this image. I think that in flight and art, image dissolves the division between idea and reality. The image of flight is so convincing and artful in this fusion that we almost forget how human the separation between imagination and fact is. Man's intuitive and historical relationship to flight consisted primarily of dreams - of flights of fancy, possibility, impossibility and metaphor. When we consider the history of flight we think almost exclusively of idea and image.

The mystery of flight is similar to our faith in the unbelievable nature of two-dimensional images, which we learn from infancy. We see it in the way a sheet of paper centimetres wide and a millimetre deep can occupy infinite space. We see it in how a mark on that paper, infinitesimally thin, is capable of condensing all the thickness of the world. We see it in the potential for the smallest and lightest painting in the world to contain the largest, heaviest object. The plasticity of the world, and that of any visual medium through which it is explained, can be almost entirely dissolved into image, in such a way as to allow the most physically slight picture to have comprehensive density.

In one sense this is entirely logical and expected. Art is a science of mimicry, measurement and illusion, but it also something stranger. Pictorial images register inversion and compression not only optically, but as feeling...small *feels* big, light, *feels* heavy and concrete. Invisible values - sensual and emotional - are rendered visible, whilst what is visible is invested with something that, in a literal sense, is unseen.

Flight, like the rest of the world – and perhaps like art - begins differently. There are directly experiential and exclusively physical explanations for the implausibility of flight. The most apparent example is our knowledge of the weight of an object increasing in proportion to its size*. Flight contradicts this expectation wonderfully, in such a way as to both confound and illuminate our experience of the world. We can understand this contradiction scientifically, or as metaphor, but I would argue that the greatest resonance is one of visual image.

In common with all of our most compelling experiences, flight is both current and old. Its realisation is recent, but its conception ancient, which means, I think, that the idea, as well as the image of flight and the sense of its reality is an historical rather than an exclusively modern connection. We know that we can fly, but we feel that we cannot and this has always been the case. Modern flight numbs this feeling, but does not entirely dispel it. We feel, very swiftly, mechanised speed and lift but it is the terrible anticipation, sometime reality, of falling which is perhaps our most urgent sensation in connection to other prime and profoundly human anxieties (sometimes I wonder whether falling is the real truth of flying).

There are linear and logical explanations for lift and flux. An engineer or scientist would explain these things in a different way to an artist and such an explanation would be no less enriching or beautiful. They would explain that the reality of gravity is defeated by another reality. An artist would simply add that eventually - understood as image – these realities not only supersede one another, they actually change into something else. As with art, flight is both something physical and non-physical. It is present and imagined, image and matter, idea and reality. These contradictions, held in suspension, draw power from one another and become more distinct. Illusion becomes more illusory and reality more real.

I think that this is also what happens in the most captivating art. In art, the irrefutability and daily strangeness of reality is augmented by a sense of impossibility. Art is, perhaps, something truer but less real. The more simultaneously present and implied something becomes the more we are paradoxically convinced of it and under its spell. The more we feel we know it, the more mysterious it becomes.

Philosophically, there are patent symmetries between art and flight. Both remain at once visualisation and apprehension, disbelief and belief, the known and unknown. Both are similarly triumphant and magical and both represent similar trends of hubris and absurdity. The conception of flight is similar to the impetus to make art.

All of these things are, of course, symbolically most familiar to us in the story of Icarus and perhaps less obviously Narcissus, or even Dorian Gray - young men who die in pursuit of an image and idea, enticed by an apparently attainable beauty which is impossible to possess. The myths illustrate that our knowledge of flight and image have always questioned not only whether or not man could fly, or look, but whether he *should*. In stretching for what is ordinarily beyond us, we transgress a boundary and, in the end, our sense of entitlement is not only a propulsion, but a cause for lack of faith. In a Godless, arguably amoral and technologically empowered age, this dimension of flight is perhaps sustained more through symbol than feeling, but it contributes nonetheless to a sense of unreality, not least because we *feel* that flight is in some way counterintuitive or even unnatural.

If the relationship between image and self and the idea of flight is not always lethal, or unnatural, it is certainly often confusing. In everyday life, it is a strange thing for a man to see his dreams and inner mechanisms made tangible. The oddness and frustration of hearing a recording of your own voice, not recognising yourself in a photograph or reflection, of chasing shadows as a child – all of these things have something in common with the artist's perplexed appraisal of 'did I do that?', or the airborne 'am I really up that high? Is everything really that far below?'

Experiencing the levitation of an object as large as an aircraft was and sometimes is more awe inspiring than any fantasy or nightmare because it is factual. An idea becomes real when it is seen. When, for example the Montgolfier brothers embarked on their first balloon flight in 1783, peopled spontaneously dropped to their knees as the balloon began to lift and stretch its moorings in Versailles. The reaction of the crowd of some 100,000 Parisians was a strange mixture of awestruck terror and joy. We revel in the idea of our mastery over nature, but we also shrink when we witness it because nature is something that we know and a triumph over it is something we feel that we do not. As part of mankind we feel big, as individuals we feel small.

This is fantastic and difficult to quantify because these sensations take us outside of ourselves and outside of our usual ability to measure the world. Something comparable happens in moments of ecstasy or lucidity. We become more aware of ourselves but more willing to give ourselves up. I understand that this is what many people feel immediately after realising that they are going to die, before – for instance – a car crash. In these profound moments, we also often describe the world as slowed down, which is curious, because usually in these situations the world is moving even more quickly than usual.

I think that flight potentially encompasses a similar timeframe. Like a kiss or falling in love, like a dream, but also like trauma and – crucially – like art, the physical seems to become both more physical and less. The world is both more attached and less so. It is hard to calculate the extent to which we embody these episodes because they cause us to recognise ourselves through extension. The connectedness of things and our control over them is absolutely to the fore, but they are also relinquished. Time appears both fixed and unstoppable.

Art crystallises this idea of a world equally close and distant, static and passing. It allows us to revisit and contemplate this experience as something possible and palpable. It allows us to be taken both outside of ourselves and within ourselves in a way that makes sense of a clarifying but altogether strange experience.

Flight holds suspension and flux in relation to something arrested and grounded in a way which is reminiscent of a mediated image's capacity to fix and fixate, whilst remaining both within and outside of its own timeframe. I think that this finds particular equivalence in the images (one image in particular, which inspired the St. Athan sculpture) of Alexander Graham Bell's tetrahedral kites. In this photograph an object of architectural scale and gravity appears impossibly weightless, suspended like the windhover 'in his riding Of / the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding / High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing'.

Typically the power of Bell's aircraft is dialectical. The kites are spread, gargantuan, massive, magnetic, opaque, solid, dense, ancient and unyielding. They are equally contained, terse, buoyant, transparent, phantom, futuristic and transcendent. Idea and fact cling to and repel one another, but in spite of these contradictory tensions - and perhaps as a result of them - the kite remains a resolutely pure construct.

I wonder if this explicitly of strain and suspension – similar to other oddly large aircraft, such as zeppelins and hot air balloons - is more pronounced than the depiction of stasis and transition in photographs of less photogenic airborne objects. If this is true, I would rationalise things aesthetically. To my mind, the tension between the kite's weight and weightlessness relates directly to that between structure and surface, between material reality and image. These qualities are made composite as something indelible and immediate, but also enigmatic and contemplative. We imagine that the slowness of the object's form and facture is distinct from the speed of the image's legibility. In fact, they are immersed in one another and mutual.

I think that the sculpture at St. Athan embodies all of these qualities. Confronted exactly face on, it is a lateral and pictorial shape and pattern more than it is a structure. Space is visible, in front, through and behind it rather than within and around it. From this perspective it feels smaller and lighter than it is. By stepping perhaps two foot either side of the kite's front and centre the reverse seems true. The kite's pattern becomes dense and structured. Its space is more compressed but also heavier and bigger as it begins to engage with the larger space around and above it. Suddenly there is a friction between the architectural enormity of the space the kite sits in and the similarly architectural space arrested within and emanating *from* the kite itself.

This happens without engaging the kite as a faceted object. As one gradually walks around the perimeter of the sculpture, one is increasingly aware of the space it occupies as a form. Walking closer, from a forty-five degree angle, the detail of its anatomy becomes more apparent, but also somehow stranger. One is aware of cable ties, wood, paper clips, glue, paint and parachute, but these things become incomprehensible as its functionality and surface is slowly subsumed into form. There is also a relay between utility and beauty, one informing the other, which makes us realise, perhaps, the transition from a craft to art-object.

From side on we are also aware of the object's silhouette acting as a portent of its flight, but, again, also succinctly reminding one of the structure's connection to its image. Perhaps surprisingly it is the object's form which allows light to pass through, rather than its surface which is unremittingly absorbent and opaque. One might even suggest that it is the sculpture's surface, as much as its form which invests it with its sense of unity and consequent weight.

I think that it is precisely this interplay that explains the magnificently strange photograph of Bell's kite in flight. The kite's weight and form feel extraordinary because of the autonomous tension between painterly and sculptural concerns I have attempted to describe above, but is also an intriguing possibility that the tension between image and form is heightened by photography. The photograph translates the kite from sculptural to pictorial space. The sculpture at St. Athan, in response to the photograph, attempts the reverse.

This dynamic between implied and literal space goes some way towards explaining the otherworldly quality of the sculpture at Saint Athan, the photograph of Bell's kite and any other images of flight. It relies upon the same rational analysis which underpins all good art, but it also indicates the other unknowable aspect of art. I think we feel the human strangeness of art as much as an illustration of the non-human strangeness of the physical world. In fact one enhances the oddness of the other.

I am reminded of the old experiment whereby a dying man was placed on a set of scales, so that as his soul left his body it could be measured in terms of weight and, as far as possible, *seen*. I think that it is wonderful that art and flight, and – if such a thing exists – a soul cannot entirely be calculated and seen. To enjoy this unknowable quality we do, however, have to know as much as possible. Knowing means seeing.

*It is for this reason manned flight was thought impossible and it was precisely this assumption that Alexander Graham Bell sought to defy through his tetrahedral constructions.

