



HAWK & DOVE ISABELLA STREFFEN

ISABELLA STREFFEN: FIELD CRAFT

ALISTAIR ROBINSON

Isabella Streffen's practice is a kind of intellectual fieldwork, engaging with the conditions of a particular culture, place and world view to throw light on their origins and consequences. Although the work here, *Hawk & Dove*, was created through engagement with a very particular context indeed, it enlarges upon three of her existing concerns: the relationship between the civic sphere of democratic societies and the military forces that are permanent yet invisible presences within them; the history of aviation, real and imagined; and the question of what is offered to sight (in contrast to what remains hidden from it, or hidden whilst in plain view).

Streffen often works with highly charged sites, and for '5x5' she created work in and for the heart of the American political establishment in Washington DC, having been resident in the city for part of the preceding year. Streffen's seventeen-minute film '*Hawk & Dove*' contains footage from two of the most highly symbolic institutions in the city of Washington – The Library of Congress, and the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Library.

The Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Library is a publicly-funded library open to all, whose mission is being a "force in the community for engaging the mind, expanding opportunities and elevating the quality of life". It, however, is Washington DC's principal public library, built in 1972 and designed by Mies van der Rohe. It embodies its own heroic ideal of universal access to knowledge for the general public of the city, and is redolent of both social ideals of the time it was envisaged and built, and of the parallel ideals of late modernism in architecture.

Somewhat distinctly, the Library of Congress is one of the few institutions on the planet with the resources and remit to function as a repository of universal, encyclopaedic knowledge – and where our most senior leaders' conception of the world can be reshaped and re-imagined. It is, bluntly, the intellectual bedrock that underpins political authority: as Streffen describes it, it is "the formal symbol of American knowledge – the single most iconic site of American learning". No greater responsibility could be imagined – though the American statesman Lee H. Hamilton has described the historic mission of Congress as being to 'maintain freedom'. The problem Streffen faced when creating her work was no less than how to represent such an ambition – and how to adopt any kind of genuine critical distance towards it without becoming pointlessly



hostile or bluntly satirical. Her stratagem is to render this clearly in visual terms: if the institution itself functions as a kind of global panopticon from which all can be seen, and all can be known; then we too, in turn, should see the institution as it sees the world, as if from a 'god's eye point of view'.

Accordingly, at first, our attention is likely to be drawn to the overwhelming visual contrasts between the democratic aspirations of the bewilderingly opulent Victorian-era architecture of the Library of Congress, and the (equally) democratic, clean, rational lines of Miesian late twentieth-century modernism. Each ideal is so perfectly realised as architectural form – as the ultimate example of its type, and of its era – that we can feel that the ideals are both the same, and yet utterly different. Both spaces boldly announce that they are places which keep alive the ideals of liberty and democracy, and are civic spaces in the grandest senses.

These sites are, to adapt an anthropological term, 'totemic' in the city. They are intended to provide a public symbol of their community's highest values and ideals, and could scarcely be more loaded with history, or more prestigious. Yet Streffen's artwork *Hawk & Dove* carries serious cargo in what might appear an irreverent container.

Streffen's approach often sees her functioning in an ethnographic manner – viewing the sites she engages with almost as a renegade anthropologist might do, exposing their unspoken codes and assumptions to new light. She addresses the institutions' stories about themselves and their constituencies from both literally as well as metaphorically unprecedented angles, whilst providing a concrete metaphor for their ways of operating. We might say that throughout her practice there is a sense in which each work is a kind of report despatched from the front line of knowledge – and in *Hawk & Dove* this is especially appropriate.

The genesis of the work illustrates Streffen's working process. Streffen's creative and visual ambitions require her to both undertake intense research and preparation, with the filming for *Hawk & Dove* requiring nearly a year's worth of technical preparations and logistical agreements, resulting in seven and a half hours of raw footage. *Hawk & Dove* was initially conceived whilst undertaking a scholarly residency at the Library of Congress, which ordinarily would mean simply undertaking research into one of the archives in the Library – in Streffen's case the Tissandier Brothers archive which charts a key chapter in aeronautical history.

From such beginnings, Streffen's process began to take shape. It became steadily apparent that her time in the Library provided her with the possibility of adopting a scholarly attitude not only towards the archive

she was studying – but towards the institution itself – its operations, its public purpose, and the buildings that it operates from. What became *Hawk & Dove* started as a means to consider the wider context of the institution's history, present functions, and place within the city – which, as the political capital of the nation, meant also its place in the polity as a whole.

The heroic history of flight is, of course, a history in which American engineers, pilots, and pioneers play a major role. The aeronautical industry remains dominated by American corporations today. The 'vehicles' that Streffen created for *Hawk & Dove* are at the opposite end of the technological spectrum to the planes normally commissioned in Washington DC. Of course, the association between Washington and aeronautical technology is strong: if one had to pick a single item that encapsulated the idea of American military (over-)expenditure, it would most likely be the highly iconic Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit – commonly known as the 'stealth bomber'. Washington support of the project, to the tune of an estimated \$2 billion per unit, has become a totemic example of how aeronautical technology can also 'dazzle' even the most seasoned insider.

Drones have been one of the principal focal points of recent years for the US defence industry, and have taken on entirely different forms – bigger, faster, better. In 2011, the former Bush administration Secretary of State for Defence, Robert Gates, remarked "From now on, it's drones, baby, drones". The 'Blue Devil Block 2' is an unmanned airship some 350 feet long planned to hover over Afghanistan, carrying a brand new surveillance system, the 'Gorgon Stare'.

Streffen's two drones – she calls them "dirigibles" – are more akin to simplified versions of 1930s-styled Zeppelin balloons than B-2s, of course. Their technical simplicity, and grace, in complete contrast to the vehicles being commissioned in the vicinity, is precisely their purpose. Their only distinguishing feature is a single, shapely logotype with a single word on. The words 'hawk' and 'dove' are not merely written, but form corporate logos similar to those of thrusting aeronautical giants. The logos, whilst naming political positions, clearly have backers making noises off-stage, who are certainly not to be seen or heard.

These interests should alert us to the fact that, if we imagined that the blunt title 'Hawk & Dove' might be a prompt towards a partisan or even leftist reading – as though the artist were being flippant or ironically belligerent – we had better remain on our mettle. The question that the title of the work might initially seem to pose – 'whose side are we on?' – is clearly not the one at stake.



AMERICAN
CENTRAL

HAWK

Dove

ART IS LONG AND TIME IS FLEETING





Steffen's modus operandi might well be described as combining the 'participant-observer' model shaped by anthropologists with the model of 'institutional critique' developed by Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson and Hans Haacke. If these figures have developed reputations for tackling debates within the museum as paradigmatic American cultural institution, few have addressed – or been able to address – political institutions directly. Part of Steffen's achievement has been not only to locate one of the most important interfaces between cultural and political institutions – but to 'swim' within that environment successfully. *Hawk & Dove* deepens the long tradition of institutional critique by adding a highly ambiguous, and complex yet politicised take on the institutions that bolster and support the very workings of American democracy.

How Steffen has achieved such a feat requires some unpacking. One term that she returns to repeatedly when describing *Hawk & Dove* is the idea of 'stealth'. The vehicles' movements through space are, most obviously, "stealthy", as though they were military drones conducting reconnaissance missions. But there is also a sense in which her works are themselves created by 'stealth', and she herself is doing the reconnaissance. We might say that her works are created both because and in spite of the institutions she has been part of, and that they engage with them whilst retaining their critical bite.

This is where the play of ironies and contradictions begins in the work. Firstly, though the work is filmed in two libraries, one of which holds twenty-two million catalogued books and is the largest resource in the world, the two words on the logos are almost the only legible written words we encounter. Steffen denies us the pleasure of lingering on the Library's treasures and rarities to focus our attention elsewhere. One of the few written words we see during the footage are ones created by other artists – specifically those commissioned



to decorate the Library of Congress's Great Hall. The words are: 'Art is Long and Time is Fleeting.' If only. Such tiny details punctuate our experience of the work with moments of wit and irony, leavening its serious public purpose. Streffen is adamant that all of her works should – even if they engage with the political landscape of the world's most powerful nation – prompt a sense of "pleasure, or even absurdity".

If our awareness of the institutions and their buildings is one half of the work, then the behaviours of the 'characters' or 'performers' inhabiting them is the other. For Streffen, the types of motion are also full of evocative, metaphorical potential. As the representatives of two competing political rationalities, the vehicles – one might almost call them 'creatures' – undertake a kind of dance, and their motions are almost balletic. These 'animals' encircle one another, never overtly attacking but playfully threatening each other – alternately "playing, hunting and falling; battling, dancing, flirting" as Streffen observes. Of course, Streffen plays on this zoomorphic impulse – endowing the vehicles with kinds of 'behaviours' deflects attention from the fact that we never see the drivers or controllers of the two adversaries – they remain beneath the threshold of visibility. It is as though the vehicles were entirely self-powered. If anyone ultimately controls their trajectories, that much is left unsaid, and left to our imagination.

It is the choreography of these silent characters that provides the heart of the film and the range of its meanings. Most obviously, the manoeuvres that the two ships perform – their stand-offs, circling threats, and soaring, bullish confidence – genuinely do feel to echo their political equivalents' political manoeuvring. More affectingly, though, it acts as an allegory of one community's means of conflict resolution. Given the recent history of party politics in America, to an





outsider the lack of proper contact between the two vehicles might bring to mind Barack Obama's description of America as beset by an "empathy deficit". For Obama, this has become "the essential deficit that exists in this country" - where the "inability to recognize ourselves in one another" is the bulwark preventing progress or even debate.

It is easy to miss the entirely obvious and wholly visible point – to miss that which is immediately in front of our eyes, but which we are distracted from. The two vehicles are, of course, entirely identical other than their (decorative) logos. Streffen's project performs the type of intellectual and affective work that anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss have claimed myths do. It establishes binaries for us, only to mediate between them, and complicate things further. This, after all, is what both art and myth are for.