

Uncanny Turnover and Doubled Separation

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"It is always the others who die," Marcel Duchamp famously said. It sounds blasé but it means that you cannot experience death. You can only observe it happening to others. And conversely: your death will be the experience of the others left around to mourn. In that sense, death -- that great Other -- is the domain of the collective self, the community of mourners who construct an experience of departure and severance to somehow explain that terrifying moment when a concrete, animate subject becomes a lifeless abstraction, literally matter and nothing more, leaving behind an inexplicable void. The collective fictions of ritual fill that emptiness, consecrating the void, and separating it from the rest of life.

The rest of life as we know it is full of small deaths, many little separations in which you actually become an other who has died. Concrete living labor becomes an abstraction that passes over into the commodity-afterlife, literally value and nothing more, divorced from its producer. It is always the others who profit. The only hope is that it will end in one final rupture. Gravestones reinforce that message. They are the ultimate reification, in the sense that they make it seem like only one separation counts. The corpse -- pure matter, already devoid of any human life -- is interred on sacred ground, and the headstone marks the spot, closing it off to any form of profanity. The ultimate separation is effected through what the German idealists would have called a *Setzung*, a positing. On a symbolic level, it needs to be repeated again and again to be maintained. In the Christian tradition, graves are kept alive with flowers and candles. In the Jewish tradition, it is smaller stones, positioned on top of the gravestone. Death itself is laid to rest again and again. Otherwise sheer absence takes over, an absence that continues to hollow out all the essentialism a community can derive from its burial grounds and funerary rites.

Hans van Houwelingen's *Sluipweg* is about this uncanny absence. A path made of disinterred headstones, it follows the outer rampart of the fort of Vijfhuizen, a disused military installation that currently houses the Artfort, a center for contemporary art. The Vijfhuizen Fort was built as part of the extensive Defense Line of Amsterdam, a system of inundation dams and artillery positions, planned in the 1870s, and finished before the First World War. It is a materialization of late 19th century nationalism, a defensive response to the imperialist paranoia that had gripped Europe in the early 20th century. Its drab casemates are built to withstand the 20th century's exploding shells in some prolonged artillery siege of national redoubt, in which the outcome of a war is decided in the battle for the nation's capital.

There was never any battle for Amsterdam, and it is difficult to imagine the geopolitical scenario that would have placed the thrust of a German invasion here, but even if that had happened, the advances in military technology and aviation soon rendered the entire network of 45 forts obsolete. There is no death here, only its obsolete potentiality. To this absence, Hans van Houwelingen adds a path of gravestones. This is not a memorial to fallen heroes, as the artist is quick to point out. The gravestones are contemporary, and were donated from all over the Netherlands. The connection between fortress (as the potential of death) and gravestones (as its actuality or evidence of its realization) only works on an associative level.

On another associative level, there is even more residual dread in walking on the names of the dead. One might remember how during the Second World War, Jewish cemeteries from Poznań to Thessaloniki were desecrated, destroyed, and turned into pavement stones, smashed up with much of the lettering still intact. The point of this forcible profanation was two-fold: on the one hand, the direct destruction of cemeteries displayed barbaric disregard for the sanctity of burial traditions (Jewish graves are never disinterred); on the other hand, the use of gravestones as pavements

involved a symbolic reversal. The oppressors could repeat their conquest over and over again, marching on over the names of the defeated. To be clear, no such desecrations appears in Van Houwelingen's *Sluipweg*; disinterment is a normal practice in the Netherlands, where gravestones are often turned to gravel or kept as personal property, once the time of mourning has passed. What seems decisive, however, is that the *Sluipweg*'s headstones are fully intact. The names of the dead are underfoot. This is still a profanation, though perhaps one deployed after so many other profanations and separations have already taken place, one that comments not upon the possibility of direct violence, but upon the brutal normalcy of death as a cultural construction built up around absence.

In his text on the project, Hans van Houwelingen stresses that he was shocked at the efficiency of death when he watched his mother pass away. In Western Europe, dying and death are normalized, sanitized and rationalized on an industrial scale, and so are the memorial practices that follow, package deals sorted according to class. They follow a standard set of laws and exceptions, regulated by a juridico-religious framework that reflects the system of continuous production for the sake of production and commodity exchange. Grave plots are not bought in perpetuity, but leased, since consecrated ground is scarce. Thus, graves -- consecrated sites of memory -- must be profaned every 10 or 20 years, putting a definite time limit on the work of mourning. Not only a consecration but also a desecration or profanation of the grave is a part of the process that keeps the commodity cycle going.

This is a normal attribute of what Max Weber called the spirit of capitalism. All individuals are equal in death, but death itself is a limited time span, more of a break in an endless process of production than growing absence. As Van Houwelingen remarks sardonically, it is a lunch break or siesta that, at some point, has to end. The gravestone is evidence of something approaching an extended holiday, a ticket stub of marble, just another consumer commodity to be ground to gravel or kept in a garden shed as a memento, unless, as in this case, it is incorporated into a work of art. This relativizes any perspective of eternal rest, a central promise in a religious-economic system otherwise dictated by an ethic of work and abstinence. That only looks like a contradiction. Actually, one could argue, echoing Marx, a permanent gravestone left to decay in perpetuity would entail abstinence from the quasi-religious pleasure taken in fulfilling the duty of production for production's sake. It is the ground itself that has to go back to work. Thus, turnover takes on a new, uncanny meaning.

It is this uncanniness that we can see in a photo Hans van Houwelingen made while researching the *Sluipweg*. It shows a cemetery in Germany with plastic signs addressed to the grave's owners. One, slightly out of view, asks the family of the deceased to contact the cemetery administration, presumably over the disorder of the grave, while another simply declares "Ruhezeit abgelaufen": the time of rest is over. This marker disciplines the unruly graveyard; discipline is written into the font itself, a product of the post-Nazi 1950s, something you could find in any botanical garden marking colonial taxonomies. It is important to understand that this mass produced marker is not just a profanation of the grave. Instead, the grave is separated out: Männer links, Frauen rechts, rendered bare by the presence of the sign, opened to a new sacrifice; its overgrown, half-forgotten meanings suddenly belong to no one, caught in an extended moment right before oblivion. Soon this grave will be gone, given over to the greater good of extended production. Death has escaped already, so to speak, but not along the path to heaven or hell, but into the endless purgatory of the shopping malls, where there are also hospitals and funeral homes. The void of death is already full with the political theology of capitalism.

Walter Benjamin tried to describe this political theology in his late fragments, including the famous "Kapitalismus als Religion." Capitalism, writes Benjamin in this short text, is permanent cult without dogma or theology. Most importantly, he says, older cults and sacrifices had the goal of atoning guilt and original sin, and of paying a debt to the gods, while the new cult of capitalism has the goal of universalizing this debt and guilt, extending it even to the gods, and we could add, to death. The entire context narrated above is the perfect illustration. That is, just as you continue to owe money after you die, you also owe it to the rest of society to vacate your grave once the time is up. Once your grave is gone, your relatives will feel guilty that it is not there anymore.

So how to evade all this guilt? In his essay "In Praise of Profanation," philosopher Giorgio Agamben continues Walter Benjamin's project. He describes the logic of this new religion of capitalism as an utter indifference to boundaries between the sacred and the profane because it applies its separations to everything under the sun. What initially seems like a profanation of all previously existing orders is actually a sanctification of all reality, as seen from "The capitalist religion [which] in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofaneable." [1] It does so by enshrining a consumer commodity that is impossible to actually use.

Profanations and serious games, says Agamben, can try to recapture the human uses of things that were separated out by capitalism as consumer commodities, but they are up against an entire culture predicated on museums and supermarkets, through which a homeless, uncanny (unhomely) pilgrimage takes places as a tourism through World Heritage sites where the impossibility of use itself is on display. "[E]verything today can become a Museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing." [2] This brings us back to Hans van Houwelingen's Sluipweg and its location, also a UNESCO World Heritage site, now updated and encircled by contemporary art. Which seems to mean that art itself is like a fortress that never fired a shot, part of some obsolete cultural plan of national redoubt, and useless in the long run against the heavy artillery of cheap goods that will break down even the Great Walls of China. The specificity of this site is its exhibition value as a local art institution in the global tourist industry, and the thing it exhibits, if we believe Giorgio Agamben at least, is the absolute impossibility of profaning. [3]

Nevertheless, Giorgio Agamben admits that there may still be, in a world dominated by the religion of capital, effective profanation, but he stresses that it "does not simply restore something like a natural use before being separated into the religious, economic or juridical sphere." The operation is more complex. Agamben cites the example of play, which he defines as a "knowing use of characteristic behavior" without the pursuit of its characteristic ends. Behaviors are not effaced, but enacted, though not to their original point. "The freed behavior still reproduces and mimics the forms of the activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end, it opens them and make them available for a new use. [...] The activity that results from this becomes a pure means. [...] It has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end." [4]

We could see Hans van Houwelingen's positioning of the Sluipweg's headstones as such an enactment. The behavior of placing them is another *Setzung*, but it does not restore a natural use of mourning for the gravestones, after being separated out from the graveyard, nor does it turn the ArtFort into a more effective bulwark against some illusory invader. Instead, it mimics both emplacements, divorcing both means from their usual ends. There is no ritual of mourning, no collective re-collection of some national spirit. Thus, the Sluipweg ultimately effects a double separation, the impossibility of identifying with paranoid plans of national redoubt, and the impossibility of identifying with other people's dead relatives in the act of walking across their graves. The path "along which death has made its escape," the lyrical subtitle that Van Houwelingen gave to the Sluipweg, leads to a precarious position: nothing is as fragile as the sphere of pure means, Agamben reminds us. But it is from here that we can catch glimpses of a new use, after all the profanations are over.

[1] Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 82.

[2] *Ibid.*, 84.

[3] *Ibid.*, 85.

[4] *Ibid.*, 86.