

A response to Andrew Hustwaite's *Launches*

People sat by their televisions. Watching. 73 seconds after NASA's launch of the Challenger Space Shuttle on January 28, 1986, it disintegrated. Eyes began to swell and water. Mouths that were caught flapping, now froze. Agape.

On board were seven crew. One of the astronauts, Ronald McNair, remains the first—and, to my knowledge, only—B'ahi ever to venture into space. Another, Christa McAuliffe, was to be the first teacher. Because of Christa, millions of schoolchildren just like Andrew Hustwaite and me tuned in via CNN and NASATV. As one with the adults for perhaps the first time in our young lives, we falsely assumed that they all had been incinerated. In fact, it is said that the crew likely died from either the gravitational forces on separation or on impact with the Atlantic Ocean. Our 73 seconds was, for them, an ordeal of many minutes.

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Within a year, two scholars from Western Michigan University had transformed the tragedy of Challenger into what is now the seminal case study of organisational failure. Analysis of the event—no longer a launch in any meaningful sense—is now almost ubiquitous in both management and applied ethics courses around the world.

In a classic line taken from that study, the authors Ronald C. Kramer and James A. Jaska remark that:

“The major portion of the paper applies this model to the “Challenger” tragedy, observing that while the technical cause of the explosion was the failure of a pressure seal, the more important cause was the flawed decision-making process at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).”

That is to say: *decisions* by people leading up to the launch can be just as, if not more, important than the actual launch of the thing itself.

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To think about people and things in this way brings me to Hustwaite's *Launches* that is opening at Tinning Street, in Melbourne, Australia, on August 27. More specifically, *Launches* has me asking: what can we make of *Hustwaite's* “decision-making”?

Well, if “to launch” means *to set about at something new*, Andrew Hustwaite's latest launch does just that. At once a work that deploys sculpture, fine art and documentary photography, cartography, and performance art, *Launches* sees Hustwaite offer up original artefacts over and onto the unforgiving red sands of South Australia's Sturt Stony Desert. However, what we find exhibited at Tinning Street are newly-produced objects such as photographic images that originate from those very launches, alongside other materials that have been repurposed from yesteryear such as maps and other artefacts. Much the same as the analysts of NASA's wreckage that we met earlier, Hustwaite meticulously documents and retrieves his launches only to be analysed.

But what are we to analyse? Quite clearly, Hustwaite appears to be toying with our spatial and temporal sensibility. He does this by surrendering human artefacts over to a landscape only to retrieve them in different spaces and at different times—and doing so using different mediums.

Perhaps too, by opening up the possibility of losing human artefacts in the Sturt Stony Desert's red sand, he also begs the question about the value of objects (and the non-human world) in

times and places devoid of humans. In the Anthropocene epoch—where humans are harming not only their immediate environment but also the otherwise safe operating conditions of Earth's biosphere—this is surely an ambitious, yet necessary question.

More pertinently for an Australian-based artist, I think, *Launches* appears to be an affront to the art *industry*; an emphatic, “FUCK YOU”. Or at least it should be. For with *Launches*, Hustwaite is beginning to remove both his art and his invested self out of the confines of the gallery. (And what a creatively and intellectually stuffy place it can be!) Doing so may well be personal but it is most certainly political. These are austere times for the fine arts in Australia; few artists or institutions have escaped the Abbott Government's assault on the arts. But artists like Hustwaite and galleries like Tinning Street are among those most effected. And so it is within this context that Hustwaite's *Launches* prompts us—as a creative community—to come together in the belief that things *can* and *are* happening anyway.

Indeed, whilst tonight might be Hustwaite's launch, it is ours too.

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