

IF BECOMING THIS: SHEILAH ANNCHEN WILSON

What sets art apart from the reality defined by commerce and industry consists in art's embrace of what rationalism likes to call delusion. Artists have frequently intervened into this simplistic opposition of "reality" to "fantasy" to show how the two positions are not so easily separable and that much of this dilemma has to do with perception itself and the way narrative forgets its being in time. Tending toward fixing events into cause and effect narrative creates sequences that progress toward a conclusion. Disorienting this linear process often brings about a return to the event of perception itself and it's mode of truth, which is often called "poetical."

Journeying and placing are central practices in Sheilah Wilson's performance and site related art works. It is pertinent to a discussion of her work titled *The Invisible Inside The Visible* to mention that she was born in a place named Caribou River and has a house at a place called River John. And that this performance work adopts the form of a story about searching for a place that has been lost, has disappeared having been discarded. We don't need to know where these rivers are in the factual terms of geography, but the figure of the river as an image of time is important to Wilson's concern with narrative.

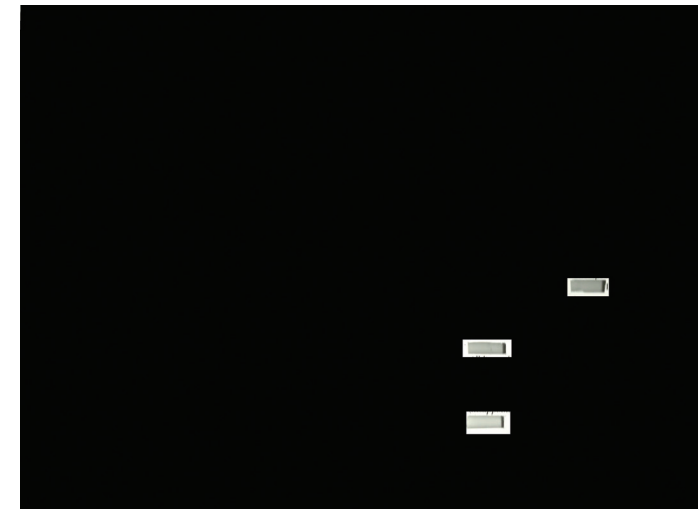
We can see in her work a treatment that takes a terrain or a territory as an unconscious whose maps are already there in latent form waiting to be revealed, or conjured. These "summonings" Wilson carries out as if she were a 19th century spiritualist or a medium. She calls herself a "translation machine." Her actions, in which the stories of individual tellers are arranged to focus on the dimension of absence take the confluence of place, memory, and story as a starting point, as a material, which paradoxically is ephemeral, provisional, or transitory.

In the environment of daily life, spiritualism and mysticism are not usually very interesting. However, when doubled through their insertion, as practices, into the environment created by an actual art work they suddenly become once again reflective and revelatory. The boundary between materialism and spiritualism is made permeable, their opposition foiled.

The performance titled *The Invisible Inside The Visible* is resonant with such spiritualist and mystical leanings. Artists have often employed practices deriving from this perspective in their search for alternatives to the rationalism of our current artistic and critical orthodoxies. Surrealism, for example, has insisted on the dream and visionary experience as a higher form of knowledge, as a bridging to a universe that would work as an instrument of healing and divination. The bricolage practices of Dada have equally provided a means to re-orient our temporality, abolishing the rational disposition of time and space, the near and the far, all in favour of disorientation. The British critic Jean Fisher wrote "Dream itself is a repository of the discarded – the traces and fragments of memory, of the 'day's residues' and unfulfilled wishes – and in this sense finds companionship with the impulses of the artistic avant-garde." (1)

In this space and time of a favourable disorientation the lost becomes the found and vice versa. Wilson has created a performance work around the search for such a discarded fragment, an element of local folklore and rural culture, the horse racing track popular amongst its rural community around the turn of the 19th century, long since disappeared. Such a finding however is not of the sort substantiated by quantifiable verification, but is rather a more ghostly apparition hinted at in the sort of oral narratives that often make up local knowledges. In a sense a "ghost," the track existed and vanished nearly one hundred years ago. Searching out the history of this place involved Wilson in a psuedo anthropological process, asking local residents as to the whereabouts of the racetrack and then gathering their responses, later publishing them in the local newspaper as a dimension of her installation/performance. Most of the responses were characterised by uncertainty, for example, "Like I say, I haven't seen it," or, "It's funny because I know it was out there," and "It will be hard to see it."

In another work, one that is essentially photographic, Wilson took a copy of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, (a writer whose work raises silence to a fine degree), and physically excised



the word silence each and every time it appears. She then blacked out the rest of the page so that each page, presented as a photographic transparency which when projected, acts as a foil to the silence as light projection. This piece thus employs a practice of doubling the negative, absencing the absence.

In the performance titled *A line drawn continuously without looking* persons are invited to participate by literally drawing from "out of body experiences." In this work performers drew a single line while narrating an account of an out of body experience. The resulting line, drawn continuously and without looking, was then transferred onto mylar to create a twenty by twenty four inch photographic contact print, leaving Wilson with indexical proof of what remains an unverifiable activity.

In her artistic practice Wilson has proposed an overlapping of populist inclusivity and rural sentiment with that slice of conceptualism best represented by artists such as Susan Hiller, Roni Horn or David Askevold. This tendency proposes an important alternative to the academic "criticality" claimed by the prevailing orthodoxies in contemporary art. Such an alternative subverts or undermines the rationalism that critical analysis rests on and perpetuates. Wilson whose trajectory is that of wonder and the uncanny binds experience to narrative, memory to place, dream to history and reality to enigma. With these practices the conflict between unity and alterity is avoided as dreams work to abolish the rational disposition of time and space, mind and body. Apparently even the barrier between the living and the dead may be overcome, and even if not, the attempt to do so has all the intrigue of failure. We can identify such an orientation with the commitment to the view that truth in art is aligned with poetry rather than the social sciences.

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Notes: (1) Jean Fisher, Truth's Shadows, in Dream Machines, ed. by Susan Hiller, Hayward Gallery, London, 2000,