



JURASSIC
technologies

revenant

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Following Roland Barthes, whose fascination with the photographic remnant led to an impassioned defence of its potential for an engaged, phenomenological response, much recent theorising of photography has focussed on its intrinsic embodiment of absence, and loss.⁴ This sense of a past irretrievably lost is reinforced by recourse to archival footage, or the use of increasingly outmoded or specialised chemical processes, or by reference to genres, styles and forms coined in a former era. This overt use of quotation counters any possibility of reading photographs as transparent, as unmediated. In this, too, they contrast diametrically with the products of the video display terminal, which constructs digital imagery, computer graphics and cyberspace as patterns of 1s and 0s inhabiting a delirious, ungrounded and ahistorical non-space.

In the work of many artists in this show, and elsewhere, reinvestment in the presence/absence dialectic is made more urgent by introducing modes of material embodiment over and above that given ontologically—by their incorporation into or presentation as installations. Such works typically dramatise or otherwise polarise that core relationship between physicality and trace/illusion integral to photography and its affiliates, while simultaneously emphasising the role of the observer in phenomenological terms, as an embodied spectator situated within a haptic as opposed to a purely optic space, a space that can be rendered malleable and plastic.

Space is taken as a physical context rather than a neutral backdrop to the work, to the degree that installation involves guiding attention away from singular objects into complexes and relations structured within the viewing space itself. The recent recourse to this mode, first formulated in Dada and Surrealist work then regenerated by Fluxus and Conceptual artists, coincided with the reconceptualisation of notions

of absence in post-structuralist theory so that rather than being conceived as mere nothingness, absence becomes a productive force seminal to discourse and psycholinguistics. **Albeit in very different ways much of the work of Ann Hamilton, Susan Hiller, Tony Oursler, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, Eulàlia Valldosera and Heri Dono investigates or exploits these conceptualisations. Likewise those artists utilising film within a gallery context who are increasingly preoccupied with these issues tend to foreground the spatio-temporal, for conceptions of space and time are necessary coordinates of a reintegration of the limits of corporeality.**

Susan Hiller has consistently highlighted presences which are traditionally disregarded, derided or dismissed as irrational, questionable, unacceptable, in short, “other”: the voices of mediums, the spirits of the dead, the workings of the subconscious, and related phantasms. Finding in these spectral presences alternative and often more potent truths, she posits counters or affirms “alters” in diverse guises, not least voices of silence, and voices that inhabit the interstices between received or acceptable speech. Homage to the authority and power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is paid in a series of old postcards which forms the basis of *Nine Songs for Europe*: on each card was printed, in one of the thirteen languages spoken within the Empire, a verse of the national anthem together with an image of the Emperor.⁵ Lit from behind by inspection lamps, which do not so much scrutinise as irradiate these varnished trophies, the images glow like holy icons. But whereas the religious icon provided a direct link to an incarnate, absent but immortal intercessor, these luminous images speak now not only to absence but to loss, for this effigy is of a temporal and not a timeless ruler. Pathos is endemic to the icons of modernity, whether film stars, celebrities, pin-ups, or rulers,

the mundane. Divested of a projected image, the beam of light from the projector ricochets via the mirror as if searching the spaces, only to be interrupted momentarily by the passing reflexion of a glass of wine, circulating soundlessly on the record turntable. Shorn of those clichéd yet eternally anticipated lyrics extolling love or mourning loss that are the staple of pop songs, the silence weighs heavily. At once poignant and bathetically absurd, this work speaks eloquently to the inescapable projections of desire, to their seductiveness and their empty promises.

Stitched together to form towering columns that rise from the floor to the ceiling, the X-rays in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *When an Object Gets Sick II* evoke monochromatic film, and with it, Marcel Duchamp's derisory estimation of that medium. For Duchamp, film offered illusion without interpretative depth; it was no more than a spectral bloodless presence, a body robbed of both interiority and aesthetic dimension.⁹ The paradox that results from constructing pillars from X-rays, that is, from images which map only the inner body, lies at the heart of this work, a plangent memorial to the artist's father who recently died from cancer and whose body provided the source of these traces. In turning to X-rays Rasdjarmrearnsook evokes, too, that ancient yet widespread style of diagrammatic draughtsmanship that limns beings by depicting only their skeletal frame and internal organs, and that was employed in certain pre-historic rituals in the hope of conjuring them forth. Pans of oil, both an ancient and a modern libation, are placed beneath.

As evidenced in Ann Hamilton's installations, environmental art frequently makes a new environment, one that obscures the old; like painting, it is usually aesthetically discontinuous with ordinary space. By affirming the continuity of the gallery space with the space of the work, Valldosera and Rasdjarmrearnsook are able not only to

dramatise the binary formations of presence/absence at the level of content but to incarnate them in form and context and hence to make them pivotal to the experience of the work.

Ann Hamilton, by contrast, highlights the point of transition, the threshold, that separates the spaces of her created world from that beyond; the sanctuary from that without its borders (whilst being constantly aware that sanctuaries maintain a symbiotic and dependent relationship with whatever is external to them: they can only exist in relation to that which they are not).

Throughout her career Hamilton has posited the physical, the viscerally present, as an essential counter to the objectifying and distancing effects of the gaze, of visibility. Typically, her work presents itself simultaneously to several of the body's senses, resisting any privileging or isolating of the faculty of sight. Materially dense, monumental, often organic, the vast quantities of matter that initially composed her world weight and ground the viewer's experience, slowing it down, literally and metaphorically. Recently, however, Hamilton has begun to juxtapose charged spaces with transient spectral forms, of the kind found in photographically based media. In *lineament* the fragile evanescent image conjures an unsteady presence, as elusive as the soul which the photograph when fixing the image was once thought to appropriate. In her most recent work, *filament*, which is now totally divested of an elaborate constructed context, swirling gauze curtains provide a physical and visual barrier. In veiling whatever is beyond they are reminiscent of the theatrics of pre-cinematic presentation, in particular of the phantasmagoric theatre of the late eighteenth century. Manifesting a strong desire for mystery and illusion over the display of the optical foundations themselves, and hence for magic over science, Hamilton's work has affinities with that of Heri Dono who shares her enjoyment of the strategies