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[In: Susan Hiller, *The Provisional Texture of Reality: Selected Texts and Interviews, 1977-2007*, edited, introduced and annotated by A. M. Kokoli (Zurich: JRP|Ringier & Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2008), pp. 9-19]

Introduction

Alexandra M. Kokoli

The premise of the 'Positions' series 'to question artistic and curatorial practices from the singular position of an artist who writes [and, I would add, talks] both on his/her own work as well as that of other artists' [1] is fulfilled in an exemplary fashion in the career of Susan Hiller to date. Not only has she produced a multitude of texts, mostly in the form of improvised talks on art, artists, and – simultaneously – culture, politics, science, the unconscious, but she has often engaged with words, writing, voices and languages in her art practice. Her automatic writing projects, such as *Sisters of Menon* (1972, *Notes* added 1979), broach the permeable boundary between writing and drawing through automatism, while weaving an anti-Oedipal non-narrative tale that places the subject in intimate networks of kinship rather than casting her/him as the outcome of separation. *Lucid Dreams* (1982), part of a series of enlarged and rephotographed photomat pictures of her own body in poses breaching the conventions of ID or indeed portrait photography, subsequently covered in layers of paint and automatic mark-making, question the soundness of pinning down identity in visual representation while subverting the modernist associations of gesturalism. One of her latest video works, *The Last Silent Movie* (2007) is an auditory collage of oral enunciations in extinct and seriously endangered languages, often spoken by their last known speaker. Certainly not silent but evoking and perhaps also redressing silencing, this video is no ordinary 'movie' as it rejects visual representation (the screen remains black throughout), creating instead a space for reflection and potentially meditation. [2] It is, simultaneously, a collection of archives in which the recordings were sourced – the product of 'research', sublating, as Hiller's work so often does, hierarchical divisions between knowledge and intuition.

Voices, words and language are important, both as building blocks and subject matter. Yet, at first glance it might seem like an oxymoron that, in her texts, Hiller often defends the self-sufficiency of the artwork, her own and that of other artists. The value and role of words *about* art is far from taken for granted, and much of what's included here has only been produced in response to requests to Hiller by editors and conference organisers to address specific issues, the work of other artists, or talk about her own, from an artist's perspective. While impressively articulate and informed, Hiller is one of the few to repeatedly note that the artist's views aren't and shouldn't be taken as the final word on anything, including their own work. [3] Nor are they explanatory, but a differently framed, perhaps less

central, aspect of their output. In doing this, Hiller isn't merely being egalitarian, let alone humble, but is instead pinpointing a persistent problem in art writing – art criticism and often art history too – that uses artists' words as explanations, proving that although the author may be dead, the authority of the artist when (s)he speaks is still strangely unquestioned. She shows caution and occasionally an outright unwillingness to speak in too much detail about her own work, to say 'too much', lest she misleads by leading too firmly. 'If talking and thinking were sufficient, and working with ideas was enough, why make art?' [4]

This rhetorical question should probably be reversed: what is the point of talking and writing about art at all? This collection bravely poses the question and, to a degree, provides clusters of equivocal and complex answers. The internal, paradoxical perhaps tension in this book – texts and talks by a confident, articulate and passionate but also cautious and often recalcitrant speaker and writer, who takes speaking and writing very seriously but also considers them as somehow lacking – is typical of Hiller's whole production and worldview. Hiller finds herself both inside and outside/ beyond, within and against (conceptualism; gesturalism; in some ways, feminism) and embraces these contradictions wholeheartedly, as she considers them an inherent part of art practice. [5] She has often spoken about her precarious yet (or: thus) privileged position as a woman and a foreigner, an American long settled in London: [6] an outsider who is within, but who retains the sharpness of observation that, for most, is worn out through familiarity, dulled by the ambiguous privilege of being 'at home': 'I never heard a woman called a cow until I came to England', reads the text of item 008: *Cowgirl* from the installation *From the Freud Museum* (1992-1994); the boxed item has more recently been expanded into an independent series of five works, *Outlaw Cowgirl* (2004-2005). [7]

This is the work of the artist, not an anthropologist. Hiller's past as an anthropologist, and one registered for a PhD for that matter, is often brought up, to her annoyance. On the one hand, her academic training might be used to convey credibility and depth to her output, which is superfluous: such attitudes, moreover, reveal a fundamental if unacknowledged contempt for art practice in general, for what it can do, grossly underestimating its particular subtlety and power. On the other hand, it misrepresents Hiller's views of anthropology and obfuscates the reasons for its rejection by her:

A long time ago, when I was doing postgraduate work in anthropology, I was so intensely moved by the images I saw during a slide lecture on African art that I decided to become an artist. My previously inchoate thoughts and feelings about anthropology as a practice and about art as a practice seemed to fall into place in one complex moment of admiration, empathy, longing, and self-awareness. I promised myself to happily abandon the writing of a doctoral thesis whose objectification of the

contrariness of lived events was destined to become another complicit thread woven into the fabric of 'evidence' that would help anthropology become a 'science'. In contrast, I felt art was, above all, irrational, mysterious, numinous: the images of African sculpture I was looking at stood as a sign for all this, a sign whose meaning, strangely, was already in place awaiting my long-overdue recognition. I decided I would become not an anthropologist but an artist: I would relinquish factuality for fantasy. The final pleasure for me that afternoon in the African art lecture was making a quick drawing of each slide image as it flashed on the screen. Sketchy and vigorous, those little pictures inserted me neatly into a modernist tradition dating back to the turn of the century, when European artists had begun to make a practice of drawing from ethnographic models, using these exotic objects as a kind of charter of possibilities [...]. And the pleasures of drawing bypassed words, which was wonderful, too. Words 'about' the peoples represented by the marvellous sculpture seemed redundant; the more facts, analyses, and theories I had learned, the further away I felt from any real connection with them, and what I wanted was connection, empathy, identification. And yet... What I was not then able to see is that repudiating an objectifying discourse (anthropology) in favour of a subjectifying discourse (art) does not even begin to resolve the extraordinary lived contradictions of merely being a subject in a culture that [...] does not allow 'a synthesis between ideology and poetry'. [8]

This is no evangelical narrative: the advent to art is immediately qualified and problematised; there is no resolution, just the beginning of another journey, full of obstacles and perils. However, I see this event, different versions of which are often repeated, as Hiller herself acknowledges above, as the equivalent of a primal scene – the birth of the artist at the expense of the death of the anthropologist and emerging scholar – simultaneously obscured and signposted through a series of screen memories, compromise-formations by critics seduced by convenient couplings or hyphenated formulations like 'art and anthropology', or 'science-art'. [9] Abandoning studious note-taking in favour of excited sketching marks a threshold that is deliberately and irrevocably crossed. Yet, while rejecting a way of knowing and producing knowledge that is indivisible from forms of violence and domination, [10] Hiller also establishes, in action, a kind of translatability between disparate discourses, between art and anthropology. [11] This does not mean that art and anthropology are alike, or that scholarship and art practice have much in common. But it does carve out a platform for potential engagement and suggests an equivalence in the partiality and specificity of each party, casting them *both* as ways of knowing. Art, therefore, doesn't need anthropology to

probe culture. As a matter of fact, in Hiller's case at least, art can be an anti-anthropological alternative.

Talking about art is perhaps an apt and still necessary strategy for making exactly this point: that art is its own system of signification, a self-sufficient way of knowing and making knowledge that converses with, draws on, influences and critiques others. The fact that this act of translation is required has to do with discrepancies in public literacy in different languages – it is not indicative of hierarchies among the languages themselves.

Section I: Re-Viewing brings together Hiller's writings and invited lectures on artists Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock, Henry Moore, Hélio Oiticica, Yves Klein, Pierro Manzoni, and film director Andrej Tarkovsky. Although some texts were commissioned as exhibition reviews, Hiller often chooses the less conventional path of focusing on audience reception, the effects of exhibitions on the meaning and function of the artwork, and the politics of art history. Combining the perspectives of fellow artist, exhibition organiser, and astute spectator, many of these texts perform an intriguing reversal – of interpreting and critiquing art writing (both criticism and history) and institutional practices in light of the artwork, rather than the other way around. One of Hiller's ways of working is through purposeful collages of quotations that simultaneously relate and revise familiar art (hi)stories.

At first glance, *Section II: Art/World* may appear to be the most 'academic' of the three: it brings together two of Hiller's best known texts on anthropology ('Sacred Circles' and 'An Artist looks at Ethnographic Exhibitions'), which, on closer inspection, are concerned with deconstructing anthropological principles and assumptions rather than operating within them; they are also, more importantly, *about* art and material culture as opposed to anthropological specimens – marking their difference through this shift of focus. Her texts on gender and art evidence a willingness, perhaps even a recognition of an ethical and political necessity to get engaged in movements and debates and to publicly take a position, without necessarily taking any of the already, clearly established sides. 'LA/London Lab', a document from a collaborative cross-Atlantic project with mixed success, exemplifies this difficult stance, which foreshadows many recent retrospective evaluations of art and feminism. Hiller looks back on how she herself and her colleagues have been classified in art movements, how they transgressed such classifications and with what implications. This section, the most overtly 'political' one, argues for the dissemination of 'the political' in art practice, history and theory. It includes a discussion with Renée Baert about a film and installation under the title *J. Street Project* (2006), a critical and reflective reprise of the anthropological and archaeological work of excavation, classification, and preservation.

Section III is named after one of Hiller's deceptively simple definitions of art: 'a kind of machine that works'. In the texts collected here, the artist intervenes in the on-going reconsideration of the legacies of Surrealism and psychoanalysis, tracing their continuing influence and (mis)representation in theory and practice. She thoughtfully considers the significance of engaging senses other than vision in the (still) 'visual arts', and returns to the (un)familiar territory of magic, intuition and the unconscious. This section also includes texts from Hiller's major curatorial project *Dream Machines*, in which contemporary artists alongside historical 'greats' 'share with other people their own experiences of the unstable zones where the visual merges with the visionary.' [12] Hiller's concern with the culturally repressed, her affinity with the para-, the edited-out sidelines, is mirrored in the staging of unlikely encounters, her focus on neglected artists, the less tidy and inconvenient of art's stories, the tangible and everyday fertile discomforts of the uncanny.

A few of the texts included in this book have previously been anthologised in the out-of-print collection *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, edited by Barbara Einzig, whose careful corrections and annotations have sometimes been adopted. Others have appeared in art magazines and other publications, and some are previously unpublished. They are a mixture of transcribed talks, lectures, interviews, and written texts. Stylistically, they broadly fall into three categories: improvised oral responses (usually interviews), texts or notes that were written only to be read out, performed, and those – a relative minority – that were put together as texts. In recognition of their differences in style and tone, the orality and often conversational character of the first two categories has been respected and preserved as much as possible. However, errors have been corrected, as publishing conventions demand, sometimes to the detriment of the unexpected epiphanies of serendipitous slips of the tongue – or pen or, most likely, finger on the keyboard. The editor has the privilege of glimpsing these uncensored, intimate imprints, before cutting or smoothing them out for the reading public. In the notes for the talk on which the article 'O'Keeffe as I see her' was based (Section I), where she talks of her attachment to Anthony Vaccarro's photograph of O'Keeffe as an old woman at work, which she carefully scissored out of a magazine and kept for decades 'like a flower commemorating a special day', Hiller originally wrote: 'Everthing is surface'. In the transcript of a conversation between Hiller and Renée Baert on occasion of an exhibition of *The J. Street Project* ('A coded reference to a marked difference', Section II), commemoration was originally 'commemortation', a lucid reminder of the dependency of memory on death, preservation on loss, while in 'O'Keeffe as I see her', sculpture came out as 'sculptrue', succinctly foreshadowing the discussion of Henry Moore's ideas of 'truth to material' five years later ("Truth" and "Truth to Material", 1998). In the case of artists' texts, the importance of these slips extends well beyond the anecdotal. (I make no assumption that all of these keyboard slips were perpetrated by the

artist herself; but whoever wrote or typed these texts was in the middle of an encounter with the work of the artist; maybe it was the keyboard itself, the ghost in the hardware.) If we are to trace deep-seated connections between artists' visual art practice and their interventions in the spoken and written word, as the 'Positions' series invites us to do, then the value of these normally expunged slips is comparable to early drawings at the very least, or even perhaps akin to all the coincidental events and circumstances that give artwork its final shape, alongside (and sometimes against) the artist's laid out plans. If artists do use language differently—'creatively' perhaps, although this is too vague a term to be useful, and perhaps also too compromised—its difference would have to embrace the balance between planning and accident, labour and 'inspiration'. A term that has justifiably fallen into disrepute and disuse in current writing on art for its associations with outdated art historical paradigms, 'inspiration' re-draws together classifications that have been culturally and historically prized apart: artist versus/as medium; artist versus/as lunatic. [13] The publishable/published text needs to be rendered sane to be readable, with all the losses that such treatment entails. The messy, bodily physicality of the voice is pushed aside (never wholly expunged; it leaves traces) in transcription, and then edited further. If the voice is 'the material element recalcitrant to meaning', [14] Hiller's decision to build so many projects around it (*Monument*, *Élan*, *Witness*, to name but a few) confirms her attraction to the ubiquitous contaminations of sense with non-sense, which makes a sense of its own.

Much more could be written by way of introducing and contextualising each of the anthologised texts. But I will heed Hiller's caveat to not lead heavy-handedly lest I mislead. Open-endedness is always more fruitful; and, in any case, 'to sum up would be premature'... [15]

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NOTES

[1] Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun, 'Introduction', David Robins, *The Velvet Grind: Selected Essays, Interviews, Satires (1983-2005)*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich/ Les Presses du reel, Dijon 2006, p. 9.

[2] See also Mark Godfrey, *The Last Silent Movie*, Matt's Gallery, London 2008.

[3] See, e.g. Hiller, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Photomat', *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1996, p. 63.

[4] 'The Performance of the Self: Hidden Histories (Jackson Pollock)', in this volume, Section I.

[5] 'I am determined to insert my work with automatism within and against the tradition of the gestural in modern art [...]'. Hiller, 'Looking at new work: An interview with Rozsika Parker', *Thinking About Art*, p. 54. On her 'within and against' position in relation to conceptualism, see '3,512 words: Susan Hiller with Jörg Heiser and Jan Verwoert'; in relation to feminism, see 'Women, Language and Truth', both in Section II.

[6] Hiller, 'Susan Hiller in Conversation with Andrew Renton', Adrian Searle (ed.), *Talking Art I*, ICA, London 1993, p. 99.

[7] *Outlaw Cowgirl* was recently shown at the BAWAG Foundation. See Rachel Withers, 'On the Trail of the Outlaw Cowgirl', *Outlaw Cowgirl and Other Works*, BAWAG Foundation, Vienna 2008, pp. 30-58.

[8] 'Editor's foreword', Susan Hiller (ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, Routledge, London 1991, pp. 1-2. The quote 'a synthesis between ideology and poetry' is a paraphrase from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, Vintage, London 1973, pp. 158-9.

[9] Hiller expresses her misgivings about such hybrids in 'The Provisional Texture of Reality (On Andrei Tarkovsky)' (Section I).

[10] On the rejection and critique of anthropology, see particularly 'Sacred Circles' and 'An Artist Looks at Ethnographic Exhibitions' (Section II).

[11] This view of translatability is indebted to Benjamin's observation that 'the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations' and, crucially, in the possibility of translation. Benjamin notes, nevertheless, that 'kinship does not necessarily involve likeness', and that the only common ground required is, on the one hand, 'the intention underlying each language as a whole' to strive towards 'pure language' and, on the other, their mutually complimentary failure to do so. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, Pimlico, London 1999, p. 74.

[12] '*Dream Machines*', p. 187.

[13] See also the graphs in the Notes (III) of *Sisters of Menon*, 'Analysis of the Relationship between Automatism and Creativity'.

[14] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2006 p. 15.

[15] Hiller, 'Women, Language and Truth', in Section II.