frieze

Second Sight

Histories of Modernism, photography and the occult

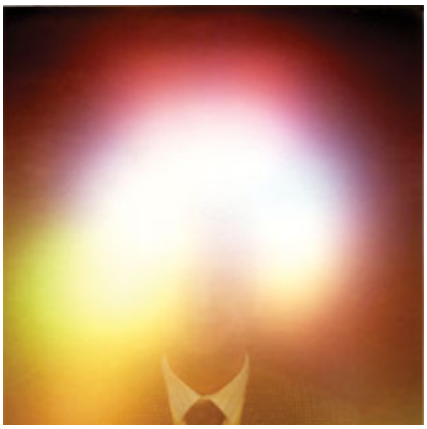
For some time now Susan Hiller has been amassing auras: conjuring the visible out of the non-visible, tracking the movements of the unseen, tracing the outlines of the evanescent – hearing voices out of the ether and giving a shape to what is not there. This set of airy conceits might stand as a vague, merely metaphorical, definition of her art, were it not that the processes in question have lately (and not for the first time) taken on a collector's practical and fervid acquisitiveness. From the archives of countless websites devoted to the exhibition of aura photographs Hiller has constructed a veritable typology of coloured light casts, collected into a book entitled Auras (Homage to Marcel Duchamp), to be published by the ICA, London in late 2007. A map of invisible emanations, it recalls and pays homage to a strain of divinatory Modernism: Marcel Duchamp's Portrait of Dr Dumouchel (1910) as a figure haloed by livid red light; Wassily Kandinsky's synaesthetic interest in the sound and scent of colour.

As Hiller points out, the modern aura photograph (the product of a technique perfected in the 1970s by Guy Coggins – a Polaroid image that brings together a picture of the subject and the reading of a hand sensor that measures his or her heart rate and electrodermal temperature) is not, in fact, an image of what the camera 'sees'. Rather, it conjoins image and idea, evidence and aspiration. In that sense, it resembles another set of photographs that she has recently been collecting: records of human levitation that replicate (deliberately or not) Yves Klein's famous photographed Leap into the Void of 1960. Among Hiller's variously absurd and charming finds in Levitations (Homage to Yves Klein), also forthcoming from the ICA this year, are credulous artists apparently unaware of the fakery involved in the original photograph, sincere believers in the possibilities of human flight, celebrated occultists such as Colin Evans (captured, via infra-red film, leaping into the dark in 1938) and numerous amateur conjurers hoping to emulate David Blaine's televised hovering mere inches from the floor.

In a sense, these two appropriative projects, and the pair of modest books that will contain them – they will eventually inspire a more ambitious series of portraits – readily recall a certain strand in Hiller's work: her interest, since the early

About this article

Published on 21/09/07
By *Brian Dillon*



Back to the main site

1970s, in the shadowing of Modernism (and modern life) by occult intensities. (They suggest also her abiding concern with the long history of photography as an index of the invisible, as much as the visible, world.) But the ambitions of these latest projects, as with the main current of Hiller's varied oeuvre, are not constrained by such themes – territories that (in large part under the sign of her influence) have been well trodden by other artists. Rather, her new anatomies of the uncanny are the latest instances of an aesthetics of the in-between: explorations of a space half-way from the conceptual to the affective, a space that since the start of her career Hiller has made her own.

Hiller's sustained sinuation between emotion and idea has frequently involved the appropriation of artefacts of popular culture, things imbued with frankly sentimental significance, and their insertion into abstract frameworks of interpretation or classification. Dedicated to the Unknown Artists (1972–6), for instance, collects over 300 postcards depicting waves crashing onto shores around Britain, each one bearing the legend 'Rough Sea'. The artist subjected them, as she wrote in 1976, to a 'methodical–methodological approach', tabulating such details as location, caption, legend and vertical or horizontal format.

For all its obvious corralling of a touching domestic sublime – chaotic white plumes of water erupting across tidy rows of hotels and guest houses, the imagined holidaymaker's sunny frisson at the image of her littoral playground overcome by natural forces – and its rigorous ticking of such visual attributes as colour, border and architectural content, Dedicated to the Unknown Artists is in essence a work about invisibility. The set of 'Rough Sea' postcards only came into existence in the artist's collection: the visual correspondences it points out were previously unseen. That Hiller effected a study of the invisible precisely by exhibiting objects of such ravishing (and also kitsch) visual texture is surely exactly what made the work, at the time, such a scandal for adherents of an austerely linguistic Conceptualism. As she puts it now, explaining its impurity, its in-between-ness: 'I would say the piece is excessive. There is too much imagery.'1

This sense of suspension between knowledge and emotion, figured often as a hovering between the seen and the unseen, is everywhere from early on in Hiller's work: in the group notation of individual dreams in Dream Mapping (1974); in the automatic-writing experiments of Sisters of Menon (1972–9); in works such as Measure by Measure (1973–ongoing) and Painting Blocks (1973–84), in which she labelled the remains of her own burnt or decimated paintings. As these last works suggest, it has a good deal to do with mourning. For Monument (1980–1) Hiller photographed a series of commemorative ceramic plagues in Postman's Park, London: each was a tribute to a Londoner

who had died trying to save the life of another. (‘Harry Sisley of Kilburn, aged ten’, for example, ‘drowned in attempting to save his brother after he himself has just been rescued, May 24 1878.’) The piece, accompanied by the artist’s voice, replicates the bench that allowed park-goers to face away, oblivious, from these harrowing little tales: stories which themselves, in their textual sparseness, acknowledge the distance between document and reality.

That gap is literally and metaphorically present also in Enquiries/Inquiries (1973 and 1975), the slide installation that Hiller had originally contrived from entries in a book she discovered in 1972: Everything Within: A Library of Information for the Home. Having been given an American equivalent, she saw that certain ‘facts’ overlapped in disorienting ways. The British volume, for example, asks ‘What causes the twilight?’ and the American, ‘Can stars be seen in the daytime from a well?’ Addressing different phenomena, both entries ask the reader to imagine a scene in which darkness becomes the necessary condition for a new kind of enlightenment. Knowledge, meanwhile – or the scattershot wisdom that is ‘general’ knowledge – is a matter of discrete but overlapping sets of facts, only one of which can be read at a time. If the viewer here feels herself stranded between competing idioms, this is also, after all, the place of the artist, or at least this artist, whose way of being-between is key to her practice: ‘you have to figure out what the two poles of your dualism are, and you have to push them until you actually see them clearly, because you can nestle in the middle somehow and create a space there.’2

It’s a question also of being between disciplines, as Hiller’s most popular work, From the Freud Museum (1991–7), attests. Born out of her sense of inhabiting ‘a specific museum of culture with permeable boundaries, which might as well be called “the Freud Museum”’, the resonant objects carefully curated behind gleaming vitrines are only obliquely related to the artefacts in Sigmund Freud’s own study or the fetishes and transitional objects of psychoanalytic discourse.3 (There are, for example, vials of water from holy wells of the world, earth samples from each of the six counties of Northern Ireland, divining rods and a dowsing pendulum.) Lately she has begun to wonder about the work’s popularity: the way its public often seems rapt and dutiful at the same time, treating the vitrine as both object of wonder and source of some obscure lesson, as though the museum were an actual cabinet of curiosities and an austerely educational exhibit. She has started to suspect that the effect of the piece lies not so much in the meticulous selection and annotation of the objects as precisely in the gaps between them, as though her art were again a matter of the invisible space between, here reflected back, like the silence of an analyst, on the viewer.

There is a degree to which even a work that appears as rooted in a visually verifiable history as The J.Street Project (2002–5) relies on this tarrying in the invisible in-between. In the 67 minutes of Hiller's film (and the accompanying 303 indexed photographs) we see German roads and streets that attest to a Jewish presence at some point in their history – the fact that the historical moment remains unknown is as unsettling as the gaps in the physical map of the country that the film asks us to imagine. The linguistic index of these street names hovers ambiguously between the commercial or civic embedding of a Jewish population in the texture of a town or city and the continuum that runs from enclave to ghetto to exile or deportation. The name, that is, announces both presence and absence, not only in the wake of the Holocaust but at every stage of the history that ghosts the film. At the same time, as with Dedicated to the Unknown Artists, the work creates a set that was hitherto invisible, except that in this case it is precisely a set of disappearances.

In Psychic Archaeology, the two-screen video installation that Hiller showed in the 12th-century Castle Vaults, Bristol, in 2005, excerpts from nine decades of cinematic representations of Jewish characters – from the early horror film Der Golem (The Golem, 1920) to Michael Radford's adaptation of The Merchant of Venice (2004) – depict a set of stereotypes that were apparently visible and invisible at the same time. In an essay on Psychic Archaeology Jörg Heiser notes that a scene from Ivanhoe (1952) showing the aged moneylender Isaac of York had been fixed in his childhood memory as the image of a Merlin-like wizard: he had seen, in other words, what was not there and failed to grasp the import of what was.4 That's not to say that Hiller merely reminds us of actual Jewish caricatures that we may have missed in such films, but rather that this is exactly how such stereotypes function: by hovering on the edge of invisibility, coming in and out of focus.

Something of the same flickering effect of cinematic archetypes may be said to inform Psi Girls (1999) in which five screens of differing vivid colours show excerpts from Hollywood films of young women performing feats of telekinesis. The blatant sublimation of unruly sexual energy into psychic powers may be a horror-movie cliché, but in Psi Girls it is also revealed to have lurid affinities with an earlier archetype: the stage-managed images of Victorian 'hysterics'.

'Thinking', says Hiller, 'is a form of collage'. Which is to say that what gives it coherence is precisely the gap or the rend between its elements. With Hiller the revealing interval or absence is all. She has begun work, she says, on a series of DVDs based on labyrinths found in French cathedrals: patterns with titles such as The Path to Heaven and The Road to Salvation. She has discovered, she thinks, a curious property of these medieval designs: as one tries to follow

their intricate meandering ('like an early Pac-Man'), making abrupt and unexpected turns from left to right or right to left, one can feel the lobes of one's brain swapping over. Of course, says Hiller, it may just be her imagination – or her urge to be there, in the gap that joins the two, in the unseen interstice between thought and desire.

1 Susan Hiller, interview with Jörg Heiser and Jan Verwoert, Romantic Conceptualism, Kunsthalle Nürnberg and Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld, 2007 p.153
2 Ibid., p.156
3 Susan Hiller, After the Freud Museum, Book Works, London, 1995
4 'Jörg Heiser on Psychic Geography' in Claire Doherty (ed.) Thinking of The Outside – New Art and the city of Bristol, Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2005

Brian Dillon

Brian Dillon is the author of a memoir In the Dark Room (Penguin, 2005). He is working on Tormented Hope: Nine Hypochondriac Lives, to be published in 2008.

Frieze
3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270