ANIMA/ANIMUS

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The quest of WE for transformation: a slippage of selves in the spaces of time

> The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. [...] artists should 'open doors and invite in prophesies, the unknown, the unfamiliar ... get you out into that dark sea.'[1]

There are few better starting points for a consideration of the work of artist collective WE (Wilson-Eflerová) than Rebecca Solnit's musings on the importance of losing our bearings and getting lost. Video artist Kye Wilson and performance artist Helena Eflerová have been collaborating on site specific video installation work for almost a decade and what binds their practice is exactly that quest for the transformative and the consequent opening of conceptual doors. Their shared work plays with the human experience of time and space, slowed to explore its meaning as self in transition, 'extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory ... becoming someone else'.[2]

This article focuses on the WE installation, *Anima/Animus*, an integrated performance and video piece that took place in Winchester Cathedral in 2013 informed by an awareness of changing practices in site specific artwork. It is significant, not only because it is a striking piece in its own right but because it is innovative in its development of the collective art practice in an increasingly digital world.

The spaces of time: Shifting practice

WE is working within a rapidly changing field. The cross disciplinary site specific work of the late 20th century, especially pieces that include video work, has changed rapidly in the 21st century with the arrival of digital technology. Those terms which defined the emergence of the practice in the 1970s – the focus on place and time, the implicit dialogue with the dedicated gallery – have all changed.

The internet has transformed both concepts of space (through dematerialisation and relocation) and time (through its ability to freeze and repeat), whilst disseminating innovative practice to a highly literate, specialised audiences and practitioners. Contemporary film is self-referential and intertextual, moving much faster than earlier forms and exploiting the visual stimulus of frequent shifting perspectives, dissolves and juxtapositions which are now normalised in work that explores the construction of reality and the interrogation of its relation to illusion.

Site specific work no longer relies on an unspoken dialogue with the gallery space. The movement away from the arts and humanities in higher education, together with the funding cuts that undermine the public gallery, have fractured this implicit context. The dialogue that now informs cross disciplinary site specific work, especially those pieces that include video work, takes place within digitised networks. As with film, on which it may draw in interdisciplinary work, site specific art has become more self-reflective as practice, shifting from location in a physical place to engaging in creative exploration about the very nature of place, time and art. The risk is that the work will lose connection with a wider audience and retreat to specialisation and abstraction.

Kate Davey opens her article on Kye Wilson's site specific art in just such terms, quoting

Nicolas Bourriard's assessment that such work is not about space but 'presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to an unlimited discussion'.[3] She goes on to argue that

> Kye Wilson's rendering of the self (namely his-self) in and through technologies of representation results in site-specific *trompe l'oeil* video installation art that invites the viewer to participate in, whilst at the same time provoking an emotive response from the audience.4

This emotive response is developed further in WE's installations where Wilson's mastery of 'technologies of representation' in the videos of Helena Eflerová's work not only negotiate time (and represented space) but firmly locate bodily experience within their shifting frames through her intensely physical performance. What is revealed is more than 'a period of time to be lived through' but their collaborative exploration of a self that exists in time and space.

From the beginning Eflerová has explored a self-conceived as in process and in symbiotic relationship with its elemental context. In her early work *Happy Days* (2006),[5] she worked with clay, constructing a cocoon around herself, then breaking through it into open air. The engagement was both more complex and more conceptual in *Trimester* (2009-2012)[6] where she coiled and tumbled in a veil inside an Aquabox transforming what had been developed as an executive tool for relaxation into one that viscerally evokes foetal existence. In this piece there is no need for the performer to enact the transition from enclosed bubble to air for, by supplying the knowledge of birth, the viewer is transformed into active collaborator, engaging more completely in the artwork through projecting forward in time.

In the stilled simplicity of intersecting video installation and physical performance in the WE installation *Anima/Animus* (2013), the frames of time, space and self are layered with a series of further intertexts. These include, as suggested by the Jungian title, those that make up the narratives by which we know the self; those that define Winchester Cathedral as a medieval sacred site and those that translate it into an alternative space of spirituality through the agency of an art installation. A further context is provided by medieval representations of the self which are illustrated in the Cathedral's statuary and stained glass. I will explore *Anima/Animus* in relation to these multiple intertexts, reading it as a meditation on the possibilities for both the contemporary self and the place of art within an increasingly aggressive materialist culture.

A slippage of selves: *Anima / Animus*

In *Anima/Animus*, Eflerová performs two, seemingly related, female figures. Performance and videoed double are placed in a corner of the Cathedral, where the installation draws on a medieval discourse of female beauty that differs greatly from that of today, creating a sense of beauty and peace that accords with the spirituality encoded in the building whilst avoiding any religious message. WE are not promoting conventional religious messages though, as Wilson says, the installation 'could still be spiritual. People can read what they want into it.'[7]

The first figure is dressed in white robes with a white head covering and lowered gaze, she is defined by slow dignified gesture, slowly raising and lowering her outstretched right

hand. As this hand reaches out, the other cradles her stomach, then slowly she brings them together. It takes 11 minutes for the lowered eyes to look up and level. There is the slightest of smiles then the face relaxes into calm, unsmiling attentiveness. The figure acknowledges the viewer. How difficult for the modern viewer to meet the unmasked self – pure, stripped, standing unadorned. The figure looks down, reaches out her hands. This figure is beautiful but its beauty is conveyed through demeanour not physical attraction. Movement is slowed to a ritualised shift from one plane to another suggesting transformation rather than activity; coding the shift from the first to the second figure as equally transformative.

After 19 hypnotic minutes the video presents another self. It is the same woman, though the luminous white clothing is now brown and her hair is loose and uncovered. This figure also acknowledges the viewer, the open face turns painfully inward. Her body is less controlled and more isolated in that the hands do not reach out nor cradle, instead they are linked with a strip of cloth which is slowly, almost with horrified fascination, brought up and finally tied into a blindfold. This figure is also beautiful but it is a troubled beauty.

Without a story on which to hang these figures, the viewer is left to construct relationship and connection, playing with ideas of doubles, of sisters, finally, perhaps, of the possibilities of a single self as suggested by the ambivalent juxtaposition and/or elision of Anima and Animus in the installation title. They are, after all, the same woman, the same physical face and body, those particular attributes that dominate the individual in 21st century consumerist society. The two figures haunt their viewers with the potential for 'Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration' enacted in the first but lost in the self-inflicted blindness of the second. One figure slips into the other and the installation turns on transformation: 'extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory' in the process of 'becoming someone' in the slowness of time.

Other contexts further extend this perception of connected and transforming selves. The first is the architectural space of the Cathedral. Adding a spatial frame to the temporal one, the video display unit repeats the arches of both recessed niche and Cathedral window. The viewer does not see the performance or video only in relation to each other but sets it in dialogue with a space already marked by time, where the brute weight of stone reaches upwards in slim columns and arches and the shifting light is traced with shadow and filtered by enclosure. In her performances Eflerová embodies both arrested image and continual change, her preferred mode emphasizes duration in long unfolding movements physically present in the Cathedral space and digitally represented in the illuminated cubicle of the video.

The windows provide a further counterpart to the doubling involved in performance and video. In medieval stained glass images the animate is rendered motionless, human figures are arrested mid gesture and their meanings decoded by the eye. Yet the stained glass grants these images a different kind of animation by translating the physical body into coloured glass that shapes and colours the light that illuminates them, while the seasons or the movement of sun or cloud vary the colour intensity of that filtered light. These translucent images do not move themselves but show a world in slow but constant transformation. Medieval statuary, illuminated by patches of coloured light or by flickering candles, equally embodies fixity while engaging with an unstable world. Eflerová's emphasis on gesture clearly responds to the complex interplay of self and world

embodied in the building and its artefacts.

So far my focus on the performance element has concerned itself with Eflerová's choreographed movement but Wilson's unobtrusive skill is key to presenting such apparently seamless transformations. In the interview accompanying the project he discusses the difficulty of 'long durational takes, minimal editing – or rather minimal obvious editing because I might actually edit the stuff quite a lot but it still looks like it is all in one take.'[8] The care in conveying complexity is equally his work.

Viewing the mechanics of the work draws attention to the 'conceptual departure point' for the Cathedral installation. Wilson reveals that this was found in 'one of the statuettes, a kind of hidden piece within the Cathedral which [...] people don't necessarily know is there.' This statuette was one of the 13th century paired figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga, representing the Christian and Jewish faiths respectively.

Exploring the installation with this additional information extend the significance of the female figures Eflerová performs into the resonant worlds of history and politics. The statues share the same body shape, the same dimensions, as they were made to fit into the uniform niches allocated them within the Cathedral walls. Stripped of most of the colour that would have originally differentiated them, their difference is now restricted to contrasting body language. That of the white-clad Ecclesia is upright and proud: she holds the crucifix, gazing outward; that of Synagoga, dressed in brown, is twisted: she holds a broken lance, is blindfolded, and caught in herself. The theological message is clear - the Jewish synagogue is outdated by the arrival of Christ the saviour - but what is so striking in these statues produced during the crusades is that the Jewish other is not demonized. The two figures still look like sisters. Not a self and sinister other but a splintered self, one lost and one reaching out.

As material for a contemporary performance, this is a message with enormous relevance. In the 13th c such sisterhood had further resonance for the crusades did not only produce clashes between Christian and Muslim but between the Latin and Byzantine churches where brother knights engaged in indiscriminate slaughter of Christians as well as unbelievers.[9] Yet there is no trace of such savagery in the calm sculpture on which WE builds what can appear a parable for our times; one in which difference is seen as aspects of the same self rather than split between good and evil, the human and non-human with the figures of women, of sisters rather than warring brothers, expressing the potential for transformation.

This relationship provides the basis for the expressive language of the WE installation. As Ecclesia, Eflerová reaches one hand to her belly and the other out to the world, poised between the spaces of body and soul, then bridges the two with interlaced hands. As Synagoga, Eflerová's hands seem half forgotten with the cloth resting on them neither touching her body nor reaching out. That she symbolically blindfolds herself points to her wretchedness in turning from the world, in limbo because without the world she cannot fully experience the body.

One reading of WE's use of the medieval statuettes is as reflection on the imagery of the self from a time without mirrors or photographs: perfection of face and physical form is subordinate to graciousness and the body is elastic, expressive, rather than pneumatic. This deeply moving work marks not only the quest for art to find a place outside the

market place, it is a means by which it may address a different public and in so doing rediscover an older place of interchange.

When the enlightenment turned its back on religious art, it invented the public space where the riches of a culture might be freely shared: the newspaper that informed its readers of events in the world, the cafe as a place to share and discuss, the library where great books could be read by all, the museum and of course, the art gallery. Today, with the enlightenment in dust around us, education is translated into 'training' for jobs that don't exist, art into commodity within the religion of capitalism, the policed spaces of the shopping mall as the new Cathedral. In the age of the internet with its relentless pressure to trivialise and dissipate attention, the newspaper becomes salacious entertainment, reinforcing fear and prejudice to keep its readers hooked through emotion rather than reason. Libraries, museums and art galleries are closing - not because they are not attended but because the public space is being squeezed out of existence. There is the cult of privatisation - a mantra that suggests that all that is public is bad, that all that is private is efficient and good even when we've seen the profit motif generate no more sense of responsibility than those other favoured crusaders looting and pillaging for their own enrichment.

The contemporary artist risks belatedness, relegation to entertainment or decoration, unless he or she discovers a place from which to make an art that stands outside time. In *Anima/ Animus* WE have created a work that incorporates self and other through foregrounding doubleness, rather than the commodification to which the postmodern self seems reduced. Repurposing the sacred space of the Cathedral does not lead to its desacralisation but to a rediscovery of a transformational space in which art, time, and self can be seen differently.

In *Anima/Animus*, WE's quest for a place and art of serious transformation seems fulfilled.

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1 Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, (London: Canongate, 2006), p.5
2 *Ibid*
3 N. Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les Presses du Reel, 2002), p 15
4 Kate Davey, 'Kye Wilson: Self-Perception and Site Specific Art' (unpublished). Available online: http://www.kyewilson.co.uk/docs/Kye%20Wilson%20Self-Perception%20and%20Site-Specific%20Art%20By%20Kate%20Davey.pdf
5 Available as video: http://helenaeflerova.com/happydays.html
6 Available as video: http://helenaeflerova.com/trimester.html
7 10 days Creative Collisions 2013; interview with Kye Wilson https://vimeo.com/73250265
8 *Ibid*
9 Jonathan Harris *Byzantium and the Crusades*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); chapters 8, 9 for the Fourth Crusade; see also M. Angold, *The Fourth Crusade: Event and Context* (London: Longman, 2004)