

*Elephant*

28 April 2020

## ELEPHANT

THIS ARTWORK CHANGED MY LIFE

### Susan Hiller's Dream Mapping Awoke Me From the Solitary Terror of My Nightmares

The British artist's "paraconceptual" investigation into the subconscious, featuring fairy rings and collective sleeping, offered guidance to Helen Charman during a period of bad dreams and insomnia.



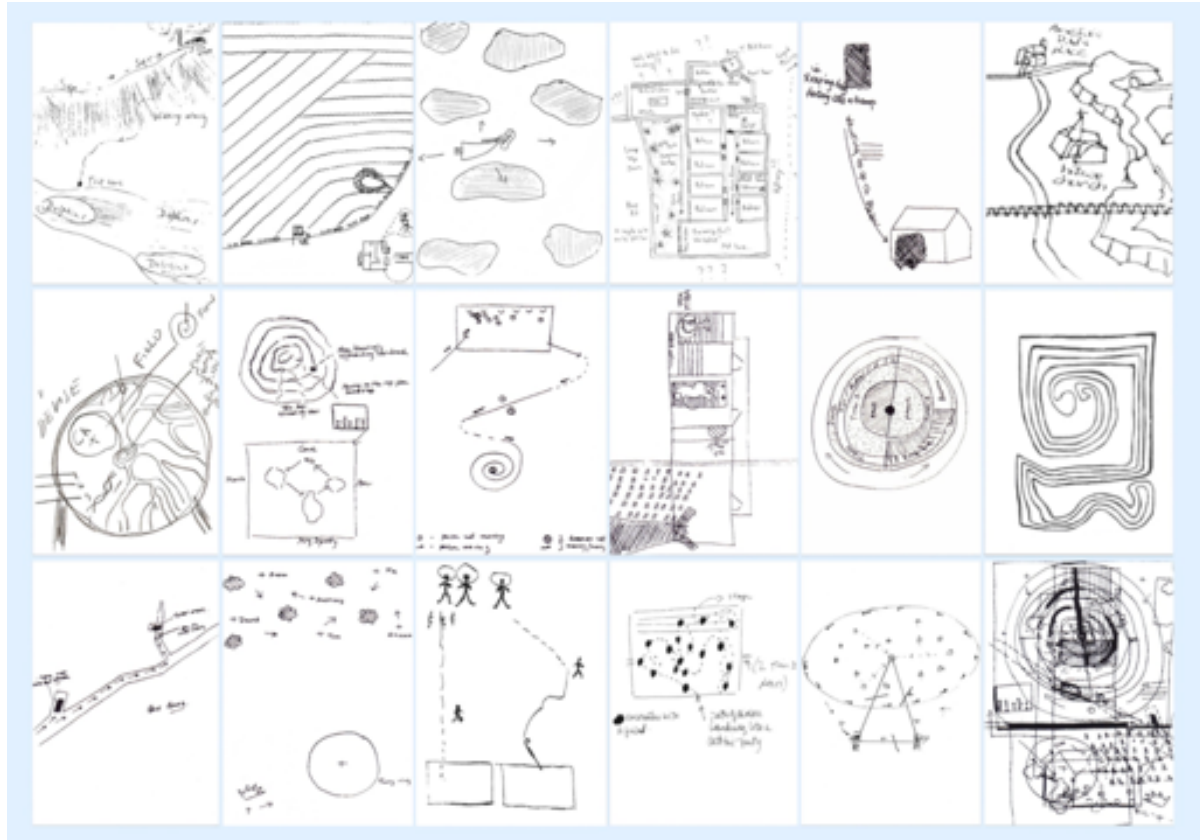
Susan Hiller, Dream Mapping, 1974. Participants sleeping in a field at Purdies Farm, Hampshire © The Estate of Susan Hiller

**Elephant and Artsy have come together to present This Artwork Changed My Life, a creative collaboration that shares the stories of life-changing encounters with art. A new piece will be published every two weeks on both Elephant and Artsy. Together, our publications want to celebrate the personal and transformative power of art.**

**Out today on Artsy is Francis M. Naumann on Marcel Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel.**

A sensation of being crushed. An inability to breathe due to the invisible creature sitting on your chest. Jerking awake as you slap thousands of spiders away from your body. Running through the corridors of your secondary school chased by a nameless, unseen horror. A face appearing in the rear view mirror of your car as you drive along alone. Throughout my late teens and early twenties I frequently experienced some variation of these and other nightmares: not every night, but often enough that the anticipatory fear of them soon developed into chronic insomnia. Too scared to sleep in case an evil dream came, I spent night after night in a tense vigil, afraid even to relax my muscles in case something “bad” seized the opportunity to take me by surprise.

It was around this time that I started to become interested in dreams—and nightmares—as a subject in their own right. As a literature student, it didn't take me long to come across, in a clumsy teenage way, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. With no understanding of what psychoanalysis was, I read—or tried to read—the book as a kind of manual: I read it like a GCSE Biology textbook. Although nightmares aren't treated fully as a subject in their own right, for Freud they function along the same basic principle as dreams themselves: if all dreams are a form of wish fulfilment, then nightmares are their masochistic shadow.



In 2011, the year I turned eighteen, Tate Britain staged a landmark retrospective of the artist Susan Hiller's work. One of the most prolific conceptual artists of the twentieth century, Hiller defined her own practice as "paraconceptual". Her work, which encompasses and complicates the boundaries between video installation, performance art, photography, and writing, pushes against "rational" and "scientific" categories of truth and fiction. Her refusal to acknowledge divisions between "real" and "false" experiences roots her work in the paranormal and the psychoanalytic.

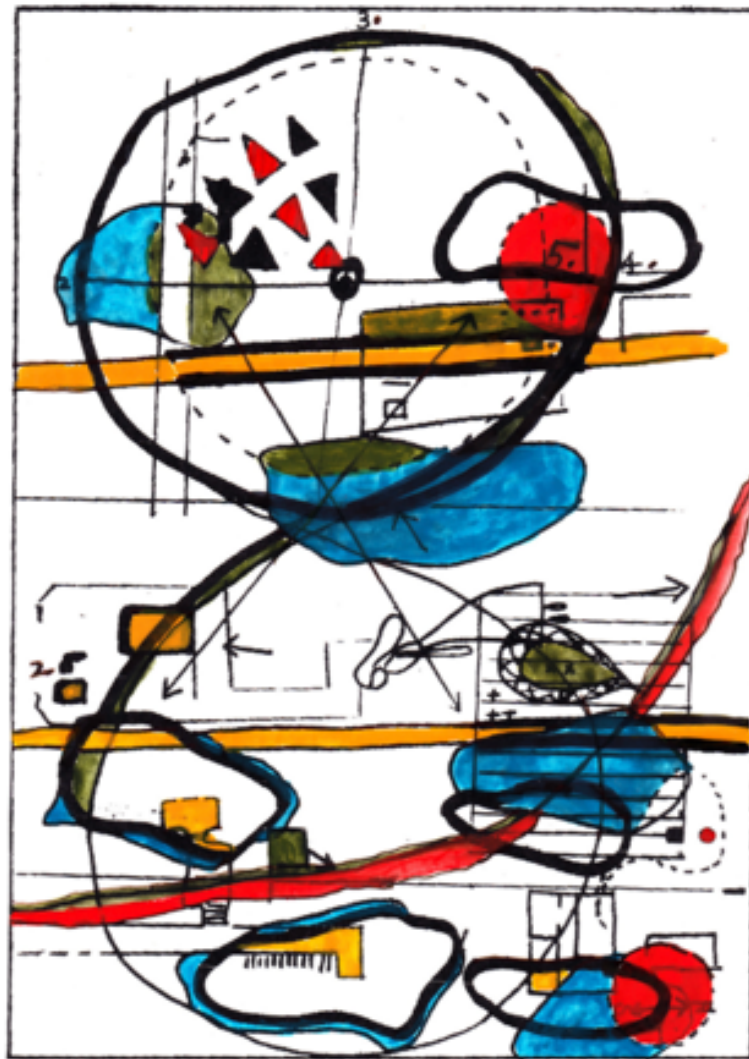
For Hiller, the entire framework of reality is built on productively permeable foundations. For the teenage version of myself that went to see the Tate Britain exhibition in 2011, it was Hiller's explicit engagement with the subconscious mind that drew me to her work. It was a strong enough pull to entice me to spend a day's worth of earnings from my waitressing job, and get the train into the city from its furthest rural suburbs.

*“I developed a heightened fear of my own subconscious, and a sense of my sleeping self as the enemy within”*

Hiller's From the Freud Museum (1991-1997) was the work I was most interested in: a display comprising of fifty archive boxes, filled with small and intriguing objects like herbs and holy water, originally installed at the Freud Museum in 1994. I was keen, too, to see her automatic writing, interested in anything that imposed some kind of order on the chaos of the psyche, but it was in another room—arguably one of the least visually exciting—that I realized what I had been looking for all along.

Dream Mapping (1974) came out of Hiller's previous “group investigation”, The Dream Seminar (1973). Attendees of the seminar met weekly to discuss their dreams, a way of turning individual subconscious experiences into a collective project. The dream work of the following year was more ambitious: a cross between a performance, an event and an experiment. Seven dreamers slept for three August nights inside “fairy rings” made of *Marasmius oreades* (also known as “Scotch bonnet” mushrooms) that naturally occur in a field in Hampshire. The participants then recorded their dreams each morning in words, drawings and diagrams, which were later copied onto transparent paper and superimposed on each other, producing composite collective dream maps.





Susan Hiller, Dream Mapping, 1974. Composite group dream map for the night of August 23-24, 1974 © The Estate of Susan Hiller

Fairy rings loom large in the folklore of Western Europe. Variouslly considered to be marks made by the dances of fairies, the rituals of witches, or the marks left by the Devil's milk churn, to enter them is considered to be a dangerous game, and the courting of ill fortune. Although familiar with the fields that made up the landscape of my adolescence, and no stranger to camping holidays, the idea horrified me. Alone out there in the field, in dangerous nightmare territory (for what could be more conducive to a night terror than entering a fairy ring?), Hiller's dreamers were exposed and vulnerable.

*“Alone out there in the field, in dangerous nightmare territory, Hiller’s dreamers were exposed and vulnerable”*

But, I realized, they were not alone. In fact, the project allowed for a way of being together even during sleep. In those layers of tracing paper, the elements of each sleeper’s subconscious mind ceased to be an individual horror, a composite monster of repressed violence waiting to pounce, but one point on a map that led to another, a feature in common with another person’s experiences.

Susan Hiller didn’t really “teach me” how to sleep, and it wouldn’t be completely honest to pretend that I don’t still sometimes struggle with nightmares, with the kind of fear that encourages me to forget to turn the bedside light off, but these insomniac interludes are increasingly few and far between. Psychoanalysis deserves some credit, too. What Dream Mapping did for me at eighteen, however, was show me that dreaming doesn’t have to be something associated entirely with private and individual experience. I learned that the mind is not a problem to be solved, and that collectivity is a mode of living that belongs to the night as well as the day.

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

*Artforum*

05 March 2019

**ARTFORUM**

## SUSAN HILLER (1940–2019)

March 05, 2019 • Ann Gallagher



Susan Hiller in 2006. Photo: Nanda Lanfranco.

IN SUSAN HILLER'S EARLY VIDEO INSTALLATION *An Entertainment*, 1990, scaled-up images and the amplified sound of Punch and Judy performances transform popular children's entertainment into a terrifying spectacle. Aspects of our collective culture considered unworthy of serious attention—in this case, puppet shows she watched with her young son—repeatedly formed the starting point for a wide range of innovative artworks produced over the artist's remarkably productive five-decade career.

Susan's art often focused on the subconscious and the paranormal. Early experiments with automatic writing and her work *Dream Mapping*, 1974, were followed by monumental installations such as *Psi Girls*, 1999, an orchestrated sound and video installation of telekinetic actions, and *Witness*, 2000, an elaborate arrangement of hanging speakers, emitting oral testimony of alien and UFO sightings.

Spoken and written language appeared consistently throughout Susan's work, and she was the author, coauthor, and editor of several books. German street signs containing the prefix *Juden*, or Jew, were painstakingly researched for *The J Street Project*, 2002–05, while recordings of endangered or extinct languages were accompanied by projections of the sound waves they produced in *The Last Silent Movie*, 2007–08.

Artifacts were similarly accumulated. Postcards entitled "Rough Sea," from locations around the British coastline, are arranged in fourteen panels in *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*, 1972–76, and numerous museum boxes filled with themed objects feature in the installation *From the Freud Museum*, 1991–96.

"I don't make singularities," Susan told *The Observer* in 2011. "I work in series. It's a political commitment. There's a non-hierarchical principle of organization in the work. I combine a Minimalist aesthetic with a Surrealist sensibility."

Her postgraduate studies in photography and film, archaeology, linguistics, and anthropology, as well as the years in the 1960s she spent traveling and living in different parts of the world with her partner, the writer David Coxhead, no doubt contributed to the very particular approach of this fiercely intelligent and endlessly curious artist. Susan was a youthful seventy-eight when she died this January. Though women of her generation struggled to achieve visibility and respect in their careers, her work featured regularly in international exhibitions alongside much younger artists in recent decades, and known and loved pieces from across the span of Susan's life were consistently visible in galleries and museums. For those fortunate enough to have known her, we will fondly remember her insight, integrity, irony, and generosity. Susan will be very much missed, but her work will live on.

Ann Gallagher is director of collections, British art at Tate, and was curator of "Susan Hiller," a retrospective exhibition held at Tate Britain in 2011.

# LISSON GALLERY

*Harper's Bazaar*  
24 September 2019

BAZAAR<sup>Harper's</sup>

## Discover the pioneering work of the conceptual artist Susan Hiller

Hiller, who died in January, will be the subject of exhibitions at Frieze Masters and Matt's Gallery



SUSAN HILLER 'CHANNELS', INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPH, MATT'S GALLERY, COPPERFIELD ROAD, 2013

"No one wants to be praised for being a 'woman artist'. Art is art," said the American-born artist Susan Hiller, speaking at a *Bazaar Art Week* event in October 2018, a few months before she passed away at the age of 78. This autumn, Hiller will receive the recognition she has always deserved – as a great artist who merely happens to be a woman – when she becomes the subject of tribute shows at both Frieze Masters and Matt's Gallery in Bermondsey.





OLIVER HOLMS

At Frieze Masters, Lisson Gallery will host a solo booth of Hiller's work, exploring themes of domesticity, family and gender roles. Some of the artist's earliest-known works will go on show for the first time, including *Small painting with long title* (1969), a pair of handprints in striking black and red acrylic that tell a very human story in an understated way.



Susan Hiller, *Small painting with long title*, 1969

© SUSAN HILLER. COURTESY LISSON GALLERY. PHOTO: JACK HEMS

Over in Bermondsey, the gallerist Robin Klassnik, who worked with Hiller for 45 years and was a close friend, will stage an exhibition in her honour at Matt's Gallery. Hiller had been about to begin planning the show – her fifth with the gallery – at the time of her death and it has since been developed in close collaboration with Klassnik and Hiller's son, Gabriel Coxhead.

"The works we have chosen for the show sit within the wider trajectory of Susan's career, which was all about articulating hidden messages and meanings that she would reflect back to the culture at large," says Coxhead of the two exhibits he and Klassnik have selected. The first, a video titled *Running on Empty* (2017), originated from the creation of her monumental audio-sculptural installation *Channels* (made from 102 cathode-ray tube television sets playing reports of near-death experiences). During its construction, Hiller and Klassnik discovered a television set that spontaneously emitted a haunting message of its own; the resulting video documents their unfolding attempts to capture the phenomenon on camera. The second exhibit, a hand puppet of a ghost or skeleton, has a macabre quality to it – Hiller kept it on her desk at home as a kind of talisman. "Both pieces are interesting because they bring into question their own status as art," says Coxhead.



Susan Hiller, *The Last Silent Movie*, 2007/2008

COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF SUSAN HILLER AND MATT'S GALLERY LONDON

Throughout her career, Hiller took an interest in numinous, otherworldly ideas, without ever subscribing to a particular ideology herself. "The work is about belief, but her own belief didn't come into it," says Coxhead. "She was interested in working with materials that were repressed or hidden." This October, a new generation of audiences will have the opportunity to unearth some of the mysteries of her extraordinary art.



Susan Hiller unravelling the weave of a canvas for *Work in Progress*, Matt's Gallery, Martello Street, 1980

COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF SUSAN HILLER AND MATT'S GALLERY, LONDON. PHOTO: ROBIN KLASSNIK

*'Susan Hiller: Ghost/TV' will be at Matt's Gallery, 92 Webster Road, London SE16, from 25 September to 27 October. Lisson Gallery will exhibit Susan Hiller's work at Frieze Masters, which runs from 3 to 6 October.*

## Demons And Dancing Dinosaurs: Perceiving And Creating With Susan Hiller

—Allan Gardner , November 11th, 2018 10:53

A conversation with conceptual artist Susan Hiller, touching on the nature of viewership, the paranormal, and the marked changes in what it has meant to be a practicing artist over the last half century



*Susan Hiller, Channels, 2013, Video installation with sound, Dimensions variable © Susan Hiller  
Courtesy Lisson Gallery*

Susan Hiller could be regarded as one of the most important conceptual artists of the twentieth century. Her work has engaged with themes and subject matters long before their perceived importance within the art world and has done so in a thought-provoking, engaging manner.

Having relocated from Florida to London towards the tail-end of the 1960s, Hiller used the nature of otherness found in such a move as an inspiration that remains present in even her most recent works. The subject of a major retrospective at Tate Britain, her work has entered the conceptual art canon as she continues to research, make, and present new work at an enviable pace.

Her work continues to ask and present relevant questions, with the recent *Resounding* series tackling the limits of our understanding and perception in the face of an ever expanding universe.

In researching *Belshazzar's Feast, the Writing on Your Wall* [a multimedia installation from 1983-4 combining video, colour photography, drawing, sound and interior furnishings reimagined in 2015 as a 'Campfire version' consisting of a stack of television sets showing fire, soundtracked by Hiller's improvised singing, media reporting paranormal sightings and familial recordings], I was reminded of a story in which a child is taken camping by his father.

He's sat in the woods by the fire and he starts to believe he sees shapes in the flames. He tells the father and his father says that the shapes are demons, he has to stay up all night, staring into the fire with his eyes open until he fights the demons off. If he closes his eyes before this, the demons will drag him through the fire and into hell.

Actually the campfire version was first shown in a somewhat different form in my show at the ICA in 1986. The original living room version refers to the real meaning of *unheimlich*, something repressed or unacknowledged in the home that emerges with uncanny, frightening effect. The campfire version relates to the way people like to tell stories around a campfire, frequently ghost stories – both situations can be frightening.

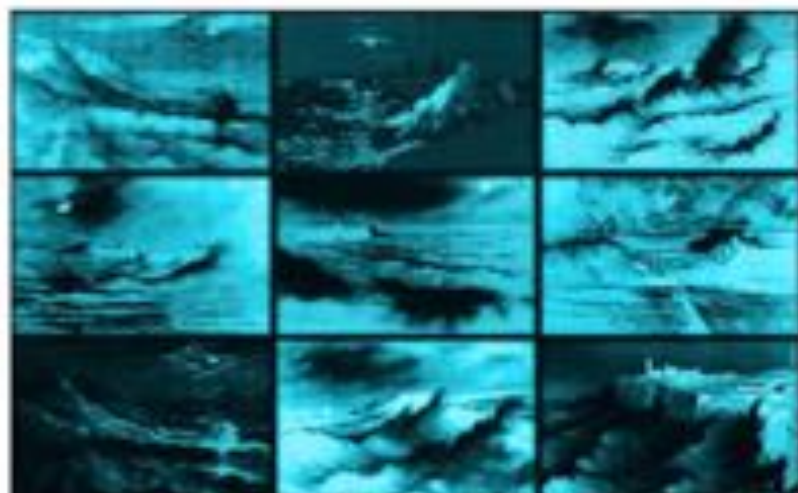
Your idea that we receive information from multiple points is foregrounded in the campfire version, but basically the effect on viewers is the same in both iterations. The work is set up to draw people in, to encourage empathy. You can accept the experience at face value or you can reject it, it's up to you.

I want to say something that relates to your really horrible story about a campfire. I always like to tell this about *Belshazzar's Feast* because it's the way people sometimes misunderstand it completely. A man who always liked my work told me that he absolutely hated this piece. I asked him why and he said "you put in all those devils. Why are you making me watch all these devils?"

I said, "You are putting the devils there, not me". But he never believed me.

Other people tell me, "I love the piece! I saw dancing dinosaurs!" They think I make animation and insert it under the fire imagery... I would like people to realise that the moving blips of light are triggering images. I want to give back that self-awareness to people. But if they insist on ignoring the fact that they're making the images, then the work has failed.





*Susan Hiller, Rough Moonlit Nights (Cyan), 2016. Gilson print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 101.6 x 76.2 cm, 40 x 30 in © Susan Hiller Courtesy Lisson Gallery*

Can it fail? If you've presented something that can trick a viewer in such a way that they refuse to believe they've even been tricked, that seems like an enormous success for revealing the power of the mind.

Well, my interest in setting up these situations is in creating a conscious awareness of how we operate. That we are simultaneously creating and perceiving the world, that the two processes are entirely related and usually simultaneous. That's what I'm interested in.

Is that what you were saying in your later work, *Pol Girls*, from 1999? [A video installation depicting a series of girls and young women manipulating telekinetic abilities, with the footage lifted from films]. *Pol Girls* has been discussed as a kind of ode to girl power or claimed that it shows how the media misrepresents the burgeoning sexuality of young women, putting a fear element into it.

A newspaper said that. It's like when people ask me "Do you really believe in this?" Do I believe in colour? Why does it matter? What's to believe? I'm an artist.

Psychokinesis is subject matter. It's not the content of the work. Everyone wants to know if I believe in 'this stuff' because it perplexes them. I provide them with something that they don't want to think about, although it's all actually just special effects...

These are all possible interpretations but basically I was showing what the media shows us. The interpretation is available, multiple interpretations. I know what my own is.

The reason I used the gospel choir on the soundtrack is that the compulsive rhythm aims to drive you to belief. The construction of the work [two minutes soundtracked, two minutes silent] is an attempt to demonstrate at least two modes of viewing, immersive and distant scrutiny. You have the option. That's the situation that I consider all of us to be in, that's why I'm sharing it. This is a long way from witchcraft, paranormal – anything like that.

That's actually one of the reasons that I wanted to do this interview. The prevalent theme that I found in researching your work has always been opportunity.

When you look at an art work you have to start somewhere. I find that I am interested in setting up situations that are empathetic to people. You can enter into it or you can withdraw from it but you have to realise that that's who we are as a society.



Susan Hiller, *Rough Moonlit Night*, 2013, Archival dry print, 51 x 76 cm (each panel) 20 1/8 x 29 7/8 in © Susan Hiller, Courtesy Lixson Gallery

That reminds me of the quote from Gertrude Stein's 1926 essay 'Composition as Explanation' that can be paraphrased as: *Nothing changes from generation to generation except what we are perceiving at that moment*. I feel that that links directly to what you're saying. From generation to generation, the setting has changed. It's the evolution of *Belshazzar's Feast*. The idea that we are now being surrounded by media, but it's being condensed so as to stop us from noticing.

That's interesting. I can't necessarily comment on that directly but I do know that artists can do a variety of different works but they're always about the same thing because you only have one being. You just find different ways of speaking about it.

In my recent *Resounding* works [audiovisual installations including transcriptions of the big bang, pulsars and plasma waves; a morse code message from a lucid dreaming experiment; static interference from radio and television programs containing traces of the big bang; and the voices of individuals describing their experiences of unexplained visual phenomena], I'm attempting to represent scientific descriptions of cosmic phenomenon.

These phenomena are only communicable through mathematics (which I don't understand) or through sound. Scientists translate light waves to sound online for our benefit. So when we experience the sounds, what are we actually experiencing? How does that relate to the way that we try to speak about these sorts of things and to feel their reality?

I am trying to focus on ways of creating a structured situation for people to realise how distant we are from experiencing some things that are said to be part of our world, knowledge that needs to be taken literally on faith....

It's quite similar to your piece *The Last Silent Movie* [A 22 minute video piece consisting of endangered and extinct languages spoken, subtitled on a black background]. I remember hearing something about the discussion around what it means for a language to die and a community to die but what I found most interesting is that there are things which used to be explained with these languages that we no longer have terminology for. The idea that we can't talk about certain things because we either don't want to or that we don't have the tools to describe them is an interesting dichotomy.

That's the situation we're at – if we don't start learning soon, we're not going to be here. I feel quite apocalyptic at the moment.

I think what you've said is true, although it wasn't my intention in that work. It comes across because using the human voice is physical. Your relationship to someone talking to you is a physical one that's very special. It's like touching. It has an intimacy that the other senses don't provide.

Of course, you experience people in other ways, but it's not the same. When you hear people talking, it's vibrations touching your ear. You compile an image of who they are. *The Last Silent Movie* provides a much more complex experience than just reading about a dying language.

It's interesting you should mention that. Researching for this interview, I had one of your works playing on some laptop speakers. My partner was in bed and she got up to ask me to use headphones because this sort of disembodied tinny voice was echoing down our hallway, sounding very unsettling. I think particularly because of the context of the paranormal within your artwork.

That's interesting because there were not – and now are – a lot of artists exploring the paranormal. They're doing things like séances. To me that's not getting anywhere. The fear that people have is very real because it's a whole area that our society categorises as frightening. It's death, it's haunting, it's ghosts, blah blah blah... It frightens people. But is anyone frightened by a recording of a deceased musician, or watching deceased actors in an old film? These contradictions are part of our culture. If we were from a different culture, we would have a very different attitude towards this kind of thing.

Even around 100 years ago, there was the occult boom in Europe – the Parisian Mesmerists, Crowley, etc.

Of course, it was a way of broadening out what the mind is. I suppose it is still continuing. The fact is that people want to see aliens when in the past it would have been angels. We have to put it in our own terms. It's the problem we have when faced with certain experiences: How can we represent it?

Do you feel like these experiences can sometimes be limiting due to their ease of reproduction? For example, I was introduced to your work as "This is Susan Hiller, she is a feminist artist making art about feminism" however there are other viewers focusing more heavily on the paranormal or 'other' aspect of your work, giving it context that way.

I'm all these things but I resent all of this categorisation. There is a difference between art and advertising. Advertising targets a potential market that's already recognisable and you want to target with your imagery. If I include women in bikinis, I assume this will appeal to a specific group. I don't think that's what art tries to do.

Art creates an audience that was previously disparate from the way it presents un-codified ideas in some kind of formal order to be considered. You end up with an audience that perhaps recognises itself as sharing some insights, but it's not like you're all wearing the same trainers.

The artists who target known groups and use their art as a logo do very well commercially. I'm not saying that it negates their work but it's different from my work, maybe because I'm from a different generation.

I'm not sure if it's necessarily generational. If I were to think about the work that I was making in relation to a particular audience then I wouldn't really consider myself to be making art, I would be producing a commercial product.

I'm not sure it's that close a relationship. If artists gave up as soon as they sold work, if they considered selling work to be reprehensible, nothing would happen. There has to be a balance.



Susan Hiller, *Storage in Metal Drawings: June-Blue Window 2017*, 48 color prints, 2017, 12.7 x 12.7 cm (5 x 5 in) 48 x 48 cm (19 x 19 in) © Susan Hiller, Courtesy Estate Gallery



With art, you can be sidelined. You can be taken away from what you could ideally be doing. Success can be one of those things that can sideline you. It would be very depressing to think that only mega-multi-millionaires were able to experience your work. These people are not necessarily always nice or interesting. It would create the question of exactly what you were doing for this to be the group your work appeals to. One of the joys of being an early conceptual artist was that nobody bought anything so we were all very pure!

When I first showed *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* [an early work consisting of postcards, charts, maps, one book, one dossier, mounted on fourteen panels], I did a piece of writing that described myself as a curator. This was me introducing the act of collection as something that you do in art. A collector expressed an interest in purchasing some – not all – of the postcard panels. Of course, I said no. I didn't realise that nobody had really seen a work like this that had fourteen parts. It was looked at like different drawings or paintings with a shared formal language instead of a conceptual project in fourteen sections.

Nobody ended up buying that work for about thirty years until the Tate bought it. We were also very privileged in those days, it was cheap for us to live and cheaper materials were what we had. It necessitated this kind of making.

**I think that kind of living was still going on even in the early 1990s. I do look on people who were able to leave art school and immediately support themselves with the dole whilst concentrating on their work with a certain amount of envy.**

And so you should. In the 1970s, in London, that's what everybody did. They weren't sitting around, they were working. This was how you supported yourself as an artist or a writer or musician. Art school was free. You probably received a maintenance grant. You didn't have to work however many hours as well as studying, it's probably one of the reasons art schools are far less exciting nowadays. The students aren't there half the time because they're working at paying jobs. This is a great cultural tragedy.

People's are increasingly making use of one-liners in art. Only artists doing very well financially can actually afford to make slow, complex work. We are seeing a mass exodus of artists from this country because they can't afford to live here. What artists need is time, that's the only thing you can guarantee.



There are some advantages for artists working now. There has never been access to information like we have. Almost everything is available freely online. It's so vastly different to how things were before. Making works like you made with *Channels* [a multi channel video installation] used to be almost impossible but now we have the ability to show audiovisual work or digitally focused work anywhere in the world. We can send works to galleries via email.

You have to be very tough to continue under difficult circumstances. You need to recognise them as difficult circumstances and push on. We're never alone, you know. If you have an idea, you must recognise that there will be many other people with this same idea. It's always surprised me, as someone who has taught a lot, why some new graduates suddenly are taken up and others are not. Looking at this from a distant perspective proves it's really not a horserace where one horse wins. I don't know what it is like, but it's not like that. You just have to work.

Somebody asked me a few years ago, "Why are you hiding in Britain?" The reason is that I have no context here. When I arrived here, nobody knew who I was. To this day I ask myself why I am still based here not out networking in New York or LA, and I've come to the conclusion that it's just not for me. I like the situation of being in a world that I don't know very well. It's interesting for me. It's all surprising.

*Hiller's work can currently be seen at the Staatliche Kunstmmlungen, Dresden, Germany, and her work was the focus of recent survey shows at The Polygon, Vancouver, and at the Officine Grande Riparazioni, Turin*

# LISSON GALLERY

*Hyperallergic*  
27 August 2018

## HYPERALLERGIC

### How Susan Hiller Has Foregrounded Empathy in Her Art

This exhibition of Susan Hiller's 50 years of work, creates an environment that begs thinking about empathy and its role in making and viewing art.

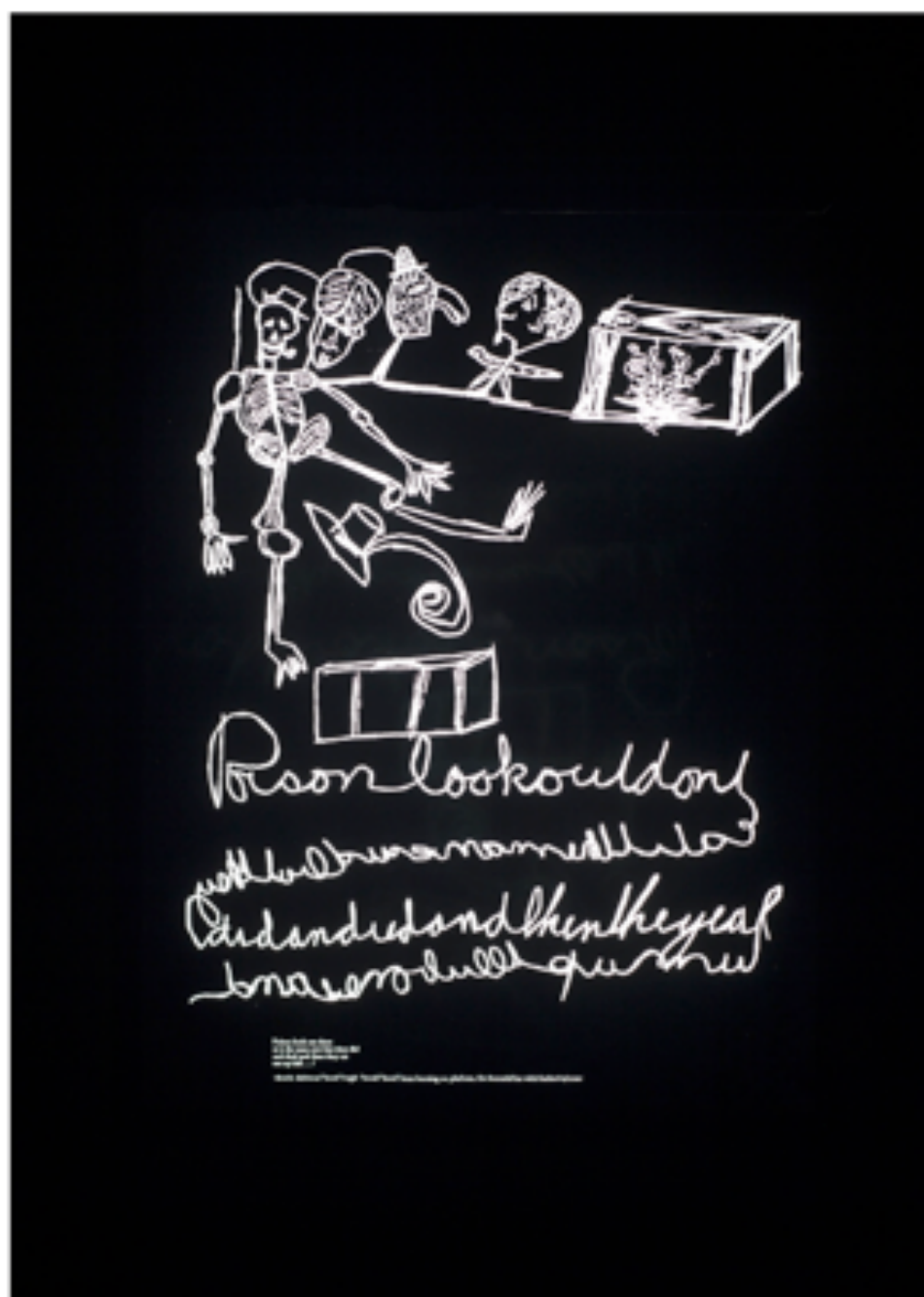


Caitlin Chaisson August 27, 2018



Susan Hiller, "From India to the Planet Mars series" (1997 - 2017), unique photographic negatives in lightboxes, each panel: 67.5 x 52 x 12 cm (© Susan Hiller; courtesy Lisson Gallery, photo by Amy Romer, 2018)

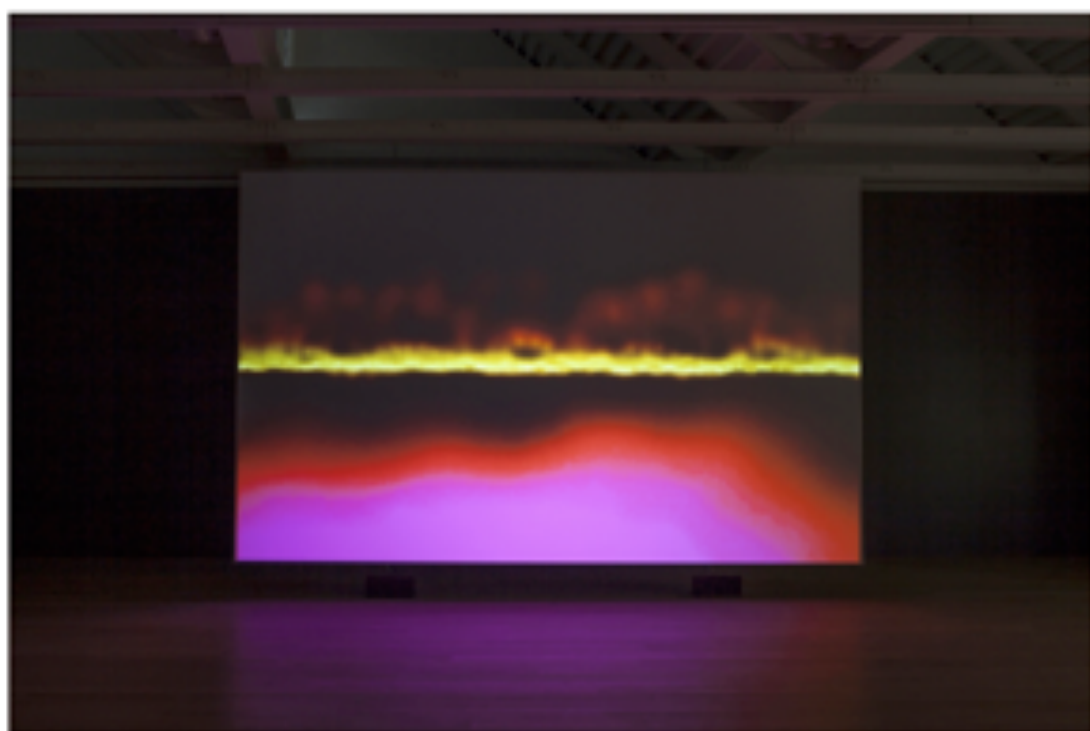
VANCOUVER, British Columbia — “Scoffers cannot alter fate.” The barely legible handwritten line scrawls across one of the automatic drawings in Susan Hiller’s series *From India to the Planet Mars* (1997–2017). *Scoffers cannot alter fate*, I repeat to myself as I witness Hollywood representations of telekinetic acts and earnestly listen to descriptions of UFO encounters. *Scoffers cannot alter fate*, Hiller seemed to be saying in a public talk delivered at the exhibition opening, when she addressed the absurdity of having to repeatedly answer the question, “Do you believe?”



Susan Hiller, detail of “From India to the Planet Mars (19) series” (1997 – 2017), unique photographic negatives in lightboxes, each panel: 67.5 x 52 x 12 cm, (© Susan Hiller; courtesy Lisson Gallery, photo by Amy Romer, 2018)

*Susan Hiller: Altered States* is the first solo exhibition to be presented at North Vancouver's newly transmogrified Polygon Gallery, previously known as Presentation House Gallery. The exhibition narrows the spectrum of the artist's 50-year-long practice into a concise selection of works that address the potencies of altered states. For Hiller, whose work emerges out of the unexplained, the dismissed, the denied, or the ridiculed, the notion of belief or disbelief is misguided. From the paranormal to the occult, these phenomena and experiences already exist in cultural life as social facts. The more pressing question to be asked is: what are the implications?

In her talk, Hiller subtly, though repeatedly, stressed the significance of empathy. Referring to her training in the field of anthropology, she said, "in art, the viewer can be forced into a situation that creates empathy, which cannot be done in the social sciences." Empathy, a feeling that increasingly haunts contemporary culture as an apparition of something gone missing, is the ability to vicariously experience the feelings or thoughts of another, even without those sentiments being communicated in a fully explicit manner. Empathy is both challenging and prosaic. A mode of making contact with the inexplicable, using imagination to inhabit a new position.



Susan Hiller, "Resounding (Infrared)" 2011, single projection video installation with sound (© Susan Hiller; courtesy Lisson Gallery, photo by Amy Romey, 2008)



The difficulty of translating the unequivocal into something that can be shared is apparent in the hypnotic sound and video installation "Resounding (Infrared)" (2013). A glowing, vibrating band of light spans the width of the screen, as though it were both a horizon and an undulating sound wave simultaneously. The gallery space is engulfed in cosmic noise. A sonic experience is composed out of audio transcriptions documenting the Big Bang, pulsar and plasma waves from the Earth's radiation belt, dream experiments, and unexplained sightings of objects in the sky. As the title implies, the mysteries of the universe are both unmistakable and invisible to us, and our perception of these events require various audio-visual translations.

As "Resounding (Infrared)" progresses, we hear a lengthy compilation of UFO reports from the Witness Archive. As speakers try to recount their experiences, they struggle with language. Uniquely singular incidents begin to sound alike. Each speaker attempts to forge equivalencies for the listener: it was as bright as a car headlight; the size of a three-story building; it was as fast as the speed of light. The dialogue clings to exact dates and precise times of occurrences, as though temporal continuity were an anchor in the world we share and understand together, as we're asked to consider otherworldly possibilities. Amidst the fumbling of words, Hiller carefully indicates the irreducible nature of these experiences. None of the spoken accounts are played in their entirety. The speakers are abruptly interrupted with the crackling frequency of white noise, a familiar sound that few people realize contains audible traces of cosmic background radiation from the Big Bang. We are wrapped back into the beginning sequence once again, where the mysterious is embedded in the banal. As translations dovetail with interruptions, empathy must fill the gaps.





Susan Hiller, "Psi Girls" (1999), five-screen video installation with sound (© Susan Hiller; courtesy Liaison Gallery, photo by Amy Romey, 2018)

The way in which one body can communicate with another body is explored in the work "Psi Girls" (1999), a five-screen video installation that projects footage from popular and cult films that depict the psychic power of young women. By way of movie magic, we are able to witness the protagonists' telekinetic abilities. Pencils hover, playing cards orbit, and water glasses tremble from the intent and concentrated gaze of girls. The marked absence of touch in the videos is complicated by the musical track, taken from a field recording of the gospel choir at St. George's Cathedral in North Carolina. The score is a clapping percussion that crescendos, generating a palpable suspense. The battery of this intense sound underscores the forcefulness of these remarkable acts, heightening the paradoxical experience of touch.

Each scene is overlaid with a spectral color, as though the installation itself has been dispersed through an optical prism, reducing the projections into their pure forms. In one scene, a young girl's powers are tested in a laboratory setting. Scientists are careful to keep their own physical distance, working at a remove behind glass walls and foil suits, measuring her abilities through a complex scenario of electrical wiring. In moments like these, Hiller breaks down the purported distinctions between rational and irrational behavior, confronting us with the instabilities and double standards of these divisions.

Hiller frequently draws from popular culture, which can be seen in the context of her explorations into shared consciousness. "G – – STS" (2012) is an arrangement of photographs Hiller has taken from various Internet sources. The photographs are ordinary domestic scenes, except for unusual ghostly emanations of light that obscure what was otherwise the subject of the photograph. The title, "G – – STS," appears to playfully make reference to the popular game of Hangman, where you fill in what you know through a process of guessing, until you either solve the riddle or die. Playfully staging the missing letters and the blank spaces of the visual grid, Hiller has offered us clues to recognize the game we are playing together, while also suggesting the failure of words to capture these experiences.

Hiller's radical propositions have often been framed through discussions of the bizarre or the spooky, little has been written about the forces of empathy at play. *Susan Hiller: Altered States* encourages us to remember that empathy is one of the most quotidian ways to experience an altered state, perhaps even without being touched.

*Susan Hiller: Altered States is on view at Polygon Gallery (101 Carrie Cates Court, North Vancouver, BC) through September 2.*

# LISSON GALLERY

straight.com

6 June 2018



## Susan Hiller: Altered States takes a mesmerizing look at paranormal activity, UFO sightings, and telekinetic powers

by Robin Laurence on June 6th, 2018 at 12:03 PM



Susan Hiller, *PSI Girls*, 1999, (detail). Five-screen video installation with sound. ©Susan Hiller, courtesy Lisson Gallery

### At the Polygon Gallery until September 2

▶ In an interview with British curator Matthew Higgs, Susan Hiller states, "I consider that definitions of reality are always provisional...that we are all involved collectively in creating our notions of 'the real'." Then she adds, "Anything that is 'super' or 'extra' is just a way of throwing up a debate around the kind of experiences that people have all the time." In addition to "super" and "extra", you can add "para"—as in paranormal—to describe the human experiences that Hiller often investigates in her work. Over her 40-year career, she has made reference to subjects that range from clairvoyance and automatic writing to fairy rings, levitation, and UFO sightings.

Perhaps it would be more precise to say that Hiller's art examines accounts of such things, posing questions about how the collective human psyche attempts to give form to the mysterious and the supernatural. The photographs, paintings, and video and sound installations in her Polygon Gallery exhibition *Altered States*, so smartly curated by Helga Pakasaar, indicate Hiller's curiosity about certain tropes, images, and narratives that recur in our culture and that yet are often considered undeserving of serious examination or contemplation.

Born and educated in the United States and based for more than four decades in London, England, Hiller studied archaeology, linguistics, and anthropology before turning her high-beam intelligence toward art making. Critics and curators have frequently observed that her doctoral degree in anthropology has informed her practice. It is both illuminating and delightful that this influential senior artist, writer, and educator describes herself as a “paraconceptualist”. (“I’m interested in occult powers,” Hiller told the *Guardian*’s Kate Kellaway, “and if people find this ludicrous that is their problem.”) An example of a practice situated somewhere between conceptualism and the paranormal—between the histories of art and science, too—is G-STs. This work is composed of a grid of small photographs of what appear to be ghostly emanations or spectral presences in everyday settings, images Hiller found on the Internet and reconfigured to resemble Polaroids. (Polaroids suggest both immediacy and, yes, provisionality.) Two of the 16 squares in the photographic grid are blank, perhaps intended to accommodate our own projections, perhaps to symbolize the open-endedness of the phenomena, or perhaps, too, to suggest that the age-old belief in ghosts is an element of that provisional rather than absolute reality that Hiller cites. As is true of all the works in the show, the images are presented without judgment. Hiller insists, again to Higgs, that her art has nothing to do with her own “belief or disbelief in the realm of the supernatural”.

Other works here include backlit negatives of automatic writing, enlarged reproductions of antique postcard imagery of high seas pounding British shores, and paintings on collaged layers of old wallpaper. Most compelling, however, are Hiller’s two immersive video installations with sound.



Hilleropeing – Susan Hiller, *Psi Girls*, 1999. Five-screen video installation with sound. Installation view.

AMY ROMER

*Psi Girls*, a five-screen work from 1999, employs brightly tinted, highly edited two-minute excerpts from the films *The Fury*, *Stalker*, *The Craft*, *Firestarter*, and *Matilda*. All were made between 1978 and 1996, all were written and directed by men, and all feature little or teenage girls exercising telekinetic or pyrokinetic abilities. Run without dialogue, *Psi Girls* is backed by a percussive soundtrack that builds in tempo, reaches a crescendo, then ends abruptly with a loud and static-y eruption of white noise as the screens go blank. The excerpts then rearrange themselves on different screens and the action begins again. It’s a mesmerizing work, drawing us in as it asks, among other questions, why popular culture of the period invested innocent-looking girls and young women with such frightening, even demonic powers. (This, before vampires took over centre stage and scary sexuality.)

Projected onto a single large screen in a darkened room, *Resounding (Infrared)* is equally mesmerizing throughout its 30-minute running time. Shifting and shimmering colours and patterns are projected onto a single large screen, keyed to a complex and encompassing soundtrack that includes audio transcriptions of Big Bang cosmic radiation, radio waves from Pulsar BO 838-45, unexplained short-wave radio recordings, and, significantly, spoken accounts of UFO sightings by many individuals around the world. Visually and aurally arresting, intellectually probing, *Resounding* asks us to join Hiller in examining the human longing to understand and give form to the deepest mysteries at the heart of our universe.

Can’t ask much more than that of any artwork anywhere.



# LISSON GALLERY

Artforum

28 April 2017

## ARTFORUM

### Susan Hiller



Susan Hiller, *Homage to Marcel Duchamp: Auras*, 2008–, fifty color archival dry prints, each 12 x 12", overall 12 1/2 x 12 1/2".

London-based artist Susan Hiller is known for her innovative media works, many of which incorporate elements of anthropology and psychoanalysis. One recent strain of her practice involves artworks that pay tribute to other artists whose works reveal an influence of occult or paranormal ideas, such as her ongoing *Homage to Marcel Duchamp: Auras*, 2008–, a collection of aura photographs, sourced online and digitally modified; the work is inspired by Duchamp's *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel*, 1910, which shows the sitter surrounded by colorful emanations. Here, she speaks about the aura works included in her current exhibition, "Susan Hiller: Paraconceptual," on view at Lisson Gallery in New York. The show, which features a range of pieces made between the 1970s and the present, runs from April 28 through June 10, 2017.

**I LIKE TO STAND IN THE MIDST** of the whirlwind, and show what's out there and what's denied. For the most part, the artists in my homage pieces—such as Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, and Joseph Beuys—did not emphasize that their work carried forward a whole tradition of occult knowledge, but they referred to it and they used it, even when denying it. When Duchamp made his painting of Dr. Dumouchel, he didn't talk about clairvoyance or ancient beliefs in auras. He adopted the idea as a painting device. I picked up on that and have contextualized it within our contemporary world, where more and more people are attracted to this kind of reality. I know our culture is in denial about a lot of things. Our hard-wiring as human beings probably prevents us from knowing a great deal about what is real, and each language also sets limits. But every once in a while people experience breakthroughs.

My approach to all this is political. The politics has to do with a conviction that it's only in moments of liminality that anything new can come into being. Whether it's an idea, a political action, an invention—it



originates where we function creatively. This is of course very important in art practice but also socially and politically.

The desire to record and capture auras has two kinds of advocates. There are clairvoyants, who say they see colored emanations around people, from which they can tell the health, temperament, and well-being of the person according to the hues, brightness, or strength of the aura. And there is also the work of scientists from the nineteenth century onward, which has led to today's specialized aura cameras. These don't actually photograph auras, but they use computers to translate the electricity from a person's hands into unique colored patterns around their portrait.

I am interested in demonstrating the connections among supposedly unique "genius" artists, and I am also interested in mapping out networks of the many people who are participants in the same kind of work but don't situate it within the discourse of art. For example: Not all the people who post their aura pictures online want to be acknowledged as artists, but they do want to have those pictures seen. It's interesting that the subject dissolves in a cloud of colored light. On the one hand, the image has a history, and on the other, it is enigmatically definitive of how we see ourselves in the digital age. You know, we are pixels; we're light.

— As told to Allison Young

# LISSON GALLERY

*ArtRabbit*

26 April 2017

# ART



## Susan Hiller: Paraconceptual

28 Apr 2017 - 10 Jun 2017

Lisson Gallery is proud to present the work of Susan Hiller for the first time at its main gallery space in New York.

### About

The exhibition includes a selection of work from over four decades of her career focusing on themes to which she has often returned, encapsulated in the title 'Paraconceptual,' which sites her work "just sideways of conceptualism and neighboring the paranormal."

Hiller has committed her practice to examining the cultural undercurrents of society and its belief systems. Using a method she describes as “a kind of archaeological investigation, uncovering something to make a different kind of sense of it,” Hiller probes the unseen, unheard, unspoken and unexplained, and in the process has explored subjects such as lost languages, telepathy, dreams and automatic writing. The exhibition in New York will include the multi-channel video installation *Psi Girls* (1999), two rare and rarely seen paintings from the 1980s, new aura photo-portraits, a recent installation of holy water medicine cabinets from her ongoing *Homage to Joseph Beuys* series and a sculptural work on automatic writing, *Homage to Gertrude Stein: Lucidity and Intuition* (2011).

In *Psi Girls*, clips from five movies show adolescent girls performing telekinetic feats. Over five large screens the girls exercise their fierce and concentrated gaze to move objects by thought alone. Each part is tinted a different color and is at first silent, then joined halfway through by the pulsating, seductive rhythm of a gospel choir. The effect is unsettling; the soundtrack draws us into a dream-like daze, a suspension of disbelief, only to suddenly shock us into distanced scrutiny by the loud ‘white noise’ of a blank television screen. Then the sequence repeats itself, each scene now on a different part of the wall and in a different fluorescent hue.

Hiller explores the fluid interrelation between the rational and the irrational. Her work is often dialectical, placing contradictions within a creative synthesis, preferring to focus our attention on the liminal areas in between the deadlock of incompatible meanings. In *Psi Girls* she does not simply appropriate movie clips as ready-mades, but edits, collages and compares them to tell their own story and comment on how altered states and magical phenomena hold such a strong fascination in our culture.

Since 2008, Hiller has made a number of works in homage to other artists – including Gertrude Stein, Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Marcel Broodthaers and Marcel Duchamp. A little-known painting by Duchamp titled *Portrait of Dr. R. Dumouchel* (1910) inspired Hiller’s aura works. In his painting, Duchamp illustrated the ancient belief in auras by showing a field of mystical colors emanating from the sitter’s body. In Hiller’s series, she presents a collection of reworked internet-sourced portraits of people who have been scanned for their auras by photographic means. These electromagnetic projections produce clouds of colored light, illustrating the individual’s personal energy field. While we might typically associate auras with historical representations of saints, Hiller has purposefully worked with ordinary people from a variety of cultures—describing their images as “metaphors of the self in the digital age.” Hiller has made a new installation of fifty aura portraits, *After Duchamp* (2016–17).

Interested in language and its layers of subliminal meaning, Hiller has experimented with automatic writing since the early 1970s. This free-associational technique was adopted by Dadaists and Surrealists, among others, to create writings or art with involuntary actions and processes not under the rigors and discipline of the conscious mind. Get William (1975/81), one of Hiller's earliest experiments in automatic writing explores this alternative mode of transmitting ideas and images, blurring the boundary between consciousness and the unconscious. The desk and book sculpture *Homage to Gertrude Stein: Lucidity & Intuition* (2011) functions as both a monument to the author and as a selective library on the topic of automatic writing. Despite her early experiments with automatic writing, she spent the rest of her life denying her interest, viewing her work as deliberate and vigilant annotation. Hiller's work excavates this ignored and suppressed aspect of Stein's legacy, and contextualizes it in this exhibition with an illuminated collection of automatic writings and drawings *From India to the Planet Mars* (1999-ongoing), produced by a wide range of people.

The exhibition also includes *First Aid: Homage to Joseph Beuys* (1969-2017), a display of first-aid cabinets containing miniature phials filled with water taken from holy wells and streams, which references both Beuys's ability to endow ordinary materials with sacred values and the potential healing power of art.

Elephant  
April 2016



## COMMUNICATIONS FROM

SUSAN HILLER

### THE OTHONIC UNCONSCIOUS

Despite making the first video installation to be bought by the Tate, **SUSAN HILLER**—an American long resident in the UK—says she has never quite felt ‘at home’ here. Likewise, her startling artistic investigations of the irrational and uncanny refuse to be domesticated or comfortably explained away. ‘If talking and thinking and working with ideas were enough,’ she tells **SUE HUBBARD**, ‘then why should we make art?’

‘And I reason at will,  
in the same way I dream,  
for reasoning is just another  
kind of dreaming.’

Fernando Pessoa

*The Book of Disquiet*

I first got to know Susan Hiller around 1999 when I included her work in my exhibition, *Chora* (co-curated with Simon Morley). Recently, when we met for lunch, after seeing her debut show at the Lisson Gallery, she told me how much of an outsider she continues to feel despite a major show at the Freud Museum, a retrospective at the Tate and recently joining this prestigious gallery. ‘For example, I’ve never been invited to join the RA’, she says over our green tea and satay. ‘Some of my students have, but I don’t fit. I’m not part of the establishment.’ With her multimedia practice of over 40 years, she is one of the most original and influential artists of her generation. But, perhaps, there’s some truth in her self-assessment. An American who has lived in London since the ‘60s, she’s never felt quite ‘at home’ in her adopted country. ‘I’d never heard a woman called a cow before I came to England,’ she says, a phrase incorporated in her installation 008: *Corrigif* from the Freud Museum, London (1992–94).

First trained as an anthropologist (a fact that, if given too much weight, annoys her), Hiller displays the intellectual rigour and curiosity of the academic, counterpointed with the ‘irrational’

explorations of the artist. Her work poses complex questions about identity, feminism, belief and the role of the artist. Never cynical or market-driven, it remains uncompromising, erudite and complex. The sort of art that forces you to think. She describes it as ‘a kind of archaeological investigation uncovering something to make a different kind of sense of it’, focusing ‘on what is unspoken, unacknowledged, unexplained and overlooked’. She explores what, to many, may seem irrational, sidelined and marginal aspects of human experience. She is interested in the traces we leave behind, be they the automatic writing generated in *Silence of Mewon*, a work made in the ‘70s that investigates the permeable boundaries between conscious and unconscious utterance, or the investigations in *Lucid Dreams* (1982), where the presence or absence of her own face, photographed inside a photo booth, underlines the fragile nature of identity and the transience of existence like a series of grungy, do-it-yourself vanitas paintings. For the *J Street Project* (2000–03), she searched for every street sign she could find in Germany that included the word *Juden* (Jew). A chilling reminder that these are places from which whole populations and histories have been erased.

Her sources are eclectic, ranging from arcane texts and psychoanalysis, to popular culture. In her 2002 lecture at the Edinburgh College of Art, she quotes Freud who, in 1911, wrote: ‘It no longer seems possible to brush aside the study of so-called occult facts; of things which seem to vouchsafe the real existence of psychic forces... which reveal mental faculties, in which until now, we did not believe.’ Freud, she writes, claimed ‘that an uncritical belief in psychic powers was an attempt at compensation for what he poignantly called “the lost appeal of life on this earth” and that the problem with believers in the occult is that they want to establish new truths, rather than scientifically “take cognisance of undeniable problems” in the current definitions of reality’.

Her Lisson debut, which occupied both gallery spaces, interwove these tensions between the scientific and the rational with our desires and instinctual drives, in four ongoing themes: transformation, the unconscious, systems of belief, and the role of the artist as collector and

curator. The presence of rare and unseen early works from the ‘70s and ‘80s underlined her interest in alchemy and psychological transformation. The 1970–84 *Painting Blocks*—made from cutting up and reassembling old paintings into sculptural ‘books’, labelled with the dates and dimensions of the original work—were shown alongside the small, ash-filled vials of *Another* (1986). Packed with the remnants of burnt paintings, these illustrate the reconfiguring of objects (or identities) in a transmuted form, one that echoes the theories of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein on reparation and creativity.

Belief and the boundaries between the unconscious and the paranormal are examined in another work on show, *Balshazzar’s Feast* (1983–84), the first video installation ever to be bought by the Tate. As with much of Hiller’s work, the readings are fluid. This new bonfire version (which surely evokes notions of burning heretics and witches at the stake) is built from a stack of television sets that each frame a flickering orange flame. Accompanied by Hiller singing, whispered reports from people apparently seeing ghostly images on their TV screens, her young son’s reminiscences of the biblical story and Rembrandt’s painting of the same name, it creates a work that evokes primitive uncanny feelings.

In her 2012 *Emergency Case: Homage to Joseph Beuys*—that quintessential shamanic artist—Hiller extends her investigations into faith, the irrational and reason. Vials of ‘holy’ water, from as far afield as the Ganges and an Irish sacred spring, allude to traditional beliefs, as well as to contemporary ‘alternative’ systems of healing. Clustered in reclaimed wooden cabinets picked up in antique markets, the installation is reminiscent of a medieval apothecary’s shop, as well as Damien Hirst’s medicine cabinets, suggesting that faith and reason are, to a large extent, cultural and historical.

It was in the eighteenth century that Carl Linnæus devised a system of taxonomy, that branch of science concerned with classification which drew together species into rational groups and gave meaning to the modern world. This desire to define and categorise is inherent in *A Longing to Be Modern* (2003), an installation made up of 32 ceramic vases from the old East and West Germany, along with 18 recycled cast bronze letters from gravestones, arranged on a kidney-shaped table in the gallery.

The role of curator and collector has long been part of Hiller’s practice. In the ‘70s, a seminal work, *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972–76), consisting of a collection of over 300 postcards by unnamed artists, all



bearing the words 'Rough Sea' and picturing stormy seas around the British coast, used the methodology, labelling and tabulation of a scientific research project. The investigations of this highly conceptual work have, more recently, been revisited in *On the Edge* (2015), a piece that presents 482 views of 219 locations along the coast of Britain where rough seas meet the land. Not only does this work tap into notions of English landscape and seascape painting, with its Romantic penchant for untamed nature and the sublime, but, in the use of ephemeral postcards, evokes that very British love of the untamed and unspoiled that need to get away from the hurly-burly to become immersed in the authentic, raw and unmitigated. The phrase 'on the edge', of course, carries multiple readings—on the edge of sanity, of mainstream society, and of artistic or psychological breakthrough (or down). The relentless stormy seas battering this small island could easily be understood as the chthonic unconscious beating at the doors of reason or anarchy pommelling the gates of polite society.

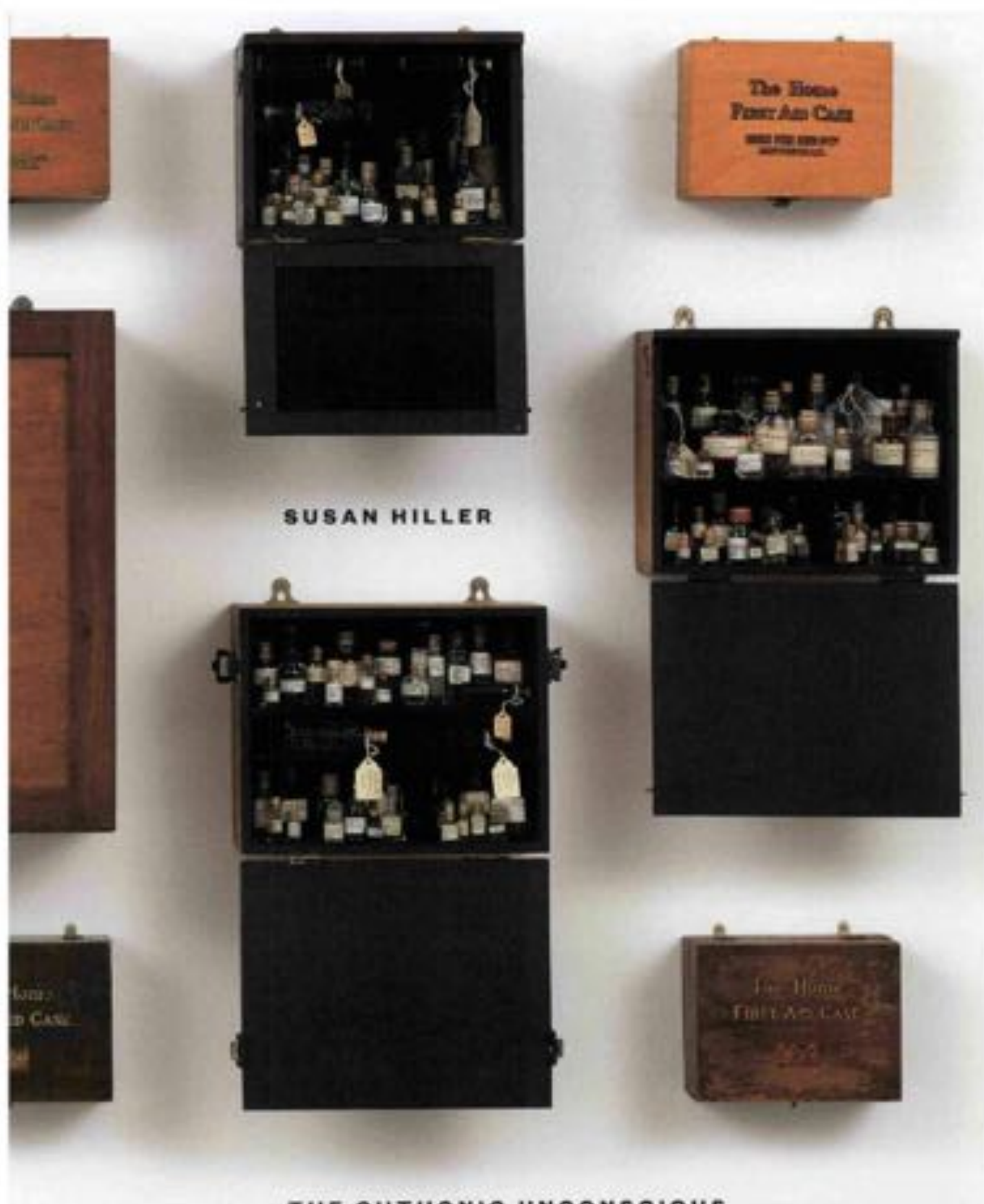
Over lunch Susan Hiller is cautious about explaining too much about her work. 'If talking and thinking and working with ideas were enough,' she insists, 'then why should we make art?' She has no overarching authorial narrative and does not provide resolutions but simply offers the viewer a complex palimpsest of ideas. What is unique about her work is that her past anthropological studies help to frame a series of questions that are then translated through the sensibility and language of art.

A prodigious writer herself, Hiller is mindful of the possible interpretations, in our de-centred world, between the discourses of art, anthropology, religion and psychology. Her evocation of the work of Joseph Beuys seems to emphasise a belief that the traditional ways in which artists make and speak about their work are largely exhausted. She does not seek definitions or clarifications but rather reflects the ambiguities of the society in which we live. Like psychoanalysis, these are built on a chain of associations that are often slippery and fluid. 'Truth', a principal allegorical character in the discourse of modernism and humanism, has within this postmodern narrative been replaced by notions of relativity and legitimacy. Hiller refuses to pander to established tastes or prejudices but, to some extent, creates the audience she needs to respond to her work. Never nostalgic or self-consciously poetic, her archeological rummaging through the iconography of the past results in a series of investigations into the arbitrary and the marginal that run like fault lines through the

contemporary world.



COMMUNICATIONS FROM



SUSAN HILLER

THE AUTHENTIC UNCONSCIOUS

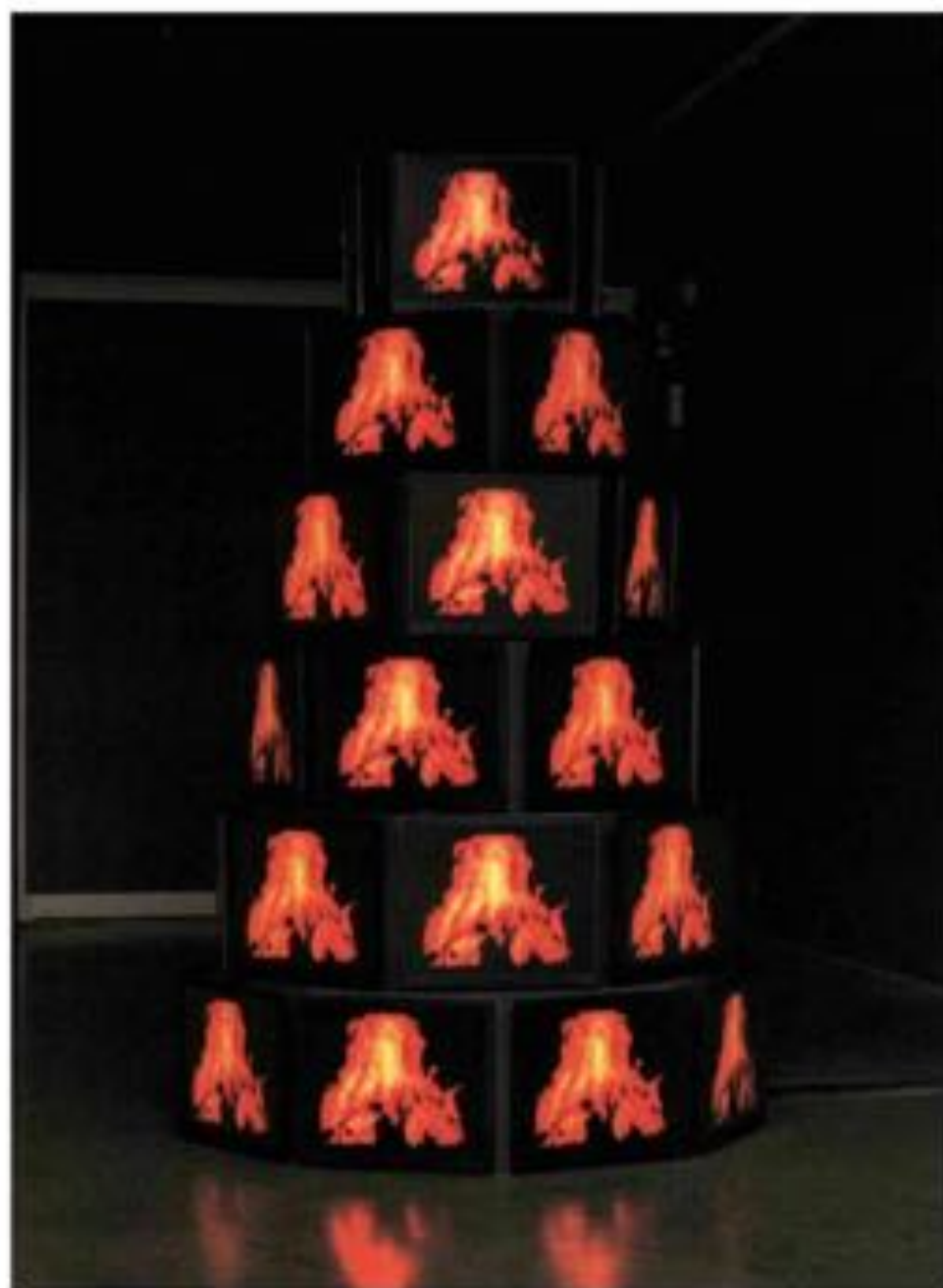


Portrait by Julia Gerasel



present the  
7-73





#### Opening pages

*Emergency Close (Homage to Joseph Beuys)*

2002

33 sections full-sized text and collages, illustrating history of holy water and vintage food and supplies  
88 x 115 cm

#### Previous pages, right

Untitled

1973

Photo Booth images  
30 x 25 cm

#### Opposite

*Beuys' Beuys (Homage to Joseph Beuys)*

1983

33 sections single-column  
inkjet print program  
Dimensions variable



**Copeland**

*On the Edge*

2005

Rough Sea postcards, map,  
482 years of 219 locations,  
mounted on 15 panels  
77.5 x 107.5 cm each

**Nghe**

*Spin Here: The Art  
of Affluence*

1998

20 framed and captioned  
split face works by Alfred  
West (1901-1951) on glass  
or mirror, various dates  
created in vintage cinema  
still accompanying  
catalogue by Robert Wilson  
(curator) and David Coward  
(collector)  
Dimensions variable



L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

*Apollo*

9 February 2016

<http://www.apollo-magazine.com/susan-hillers-search-for-the-right-medium/>

utm\_source=rss&utm\_medium=rss&utm\_campaign=susan-hillers-search-for-the-right-medium

# APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE



Susan Hiller. Photo: Mark Lyon, 2014

## Susan Hiller's search for the right medium

**ISABEL STEVENS**

*The pioneering conceptual artist Susan Hiller talks to Apollo about her interest in the supernatural, working in different materials, her commitment to feminism – and why role models are hard to find*

'What's happened to the witch, the German puppet witch?' Susan Hiller (b. 1940) enquires of the waitress in the North West London bar that we're sitting in, which she regularly frequents. Behind us every inch of the wall is filled with flea market paintings. Above us, shelves are casually piled with all manner of dusty bric-a-brac: bottles, trophies, ornaments, a Budweiser sign, and a stuffed owl. The witch is found. She's hidden behind old saucepans, lamps and violins hanging from the ceiling. Hiller is an artist who has always had an eye for everyday objects and occurrences and an interest in the supernatural, subjects that before her, were rarely the focus of artworks – be it the 'Rough Sea' postcards she collected from the 1970s of British seaside towns, or the stories of UFO sightings she gathered and recorded for *Witness* (2000). So this seems an apt setting to look back over her 50-year career. 'That sail boat wasn't here last time,' she says.

Hiller hates the word 'retrospective' but her current show (until 9 January), not far away at the Lisson's two galleries, is close to being one. It contains new work but also reaches right back to the 1960s, when she abandoned a career in anthropology. It was during a lecture on African art that she made the decision to pursue her teenage dream of becoming an artist: 'I committed myself to dealing with our culture,' she tells me. Hiller moved from America to London after visiting the city and didn't want to leave: 'It was an astonishing place in the late '60s and '70s. It was the most open situation for all the arts. Different worlds were more interconnected. People came from all over because it was cheaper. It's hard to believe now.'

While she works with ephemera as Pop artists did, and while the appearance of Hiller's work may resemble her conceptual contemporaries and forbearers, her thinking has always been different. She calls her practice 'paraconceptual', her interest in the supernatural separating her from other artists of the time. In her *Homage* series, she has even looked back into art history, highlighting where artists have been inspired by the paranormal but have distanced themselves from it. Influenced by minimalism and conceptualism, she has always worked in series: 'It's more democratic, less hierarchical than a single thing that is elevated. Singularity is very old fashioned. Multiplicity is more compatible with the way we are. We're surrounded by endless multiples.'



Hiller has also worked with many different media, from photography and ceramics to moving image, and she used sound before many other artists thought to. She likes it because it's ghostly and intimate. 'And it's actually physical. The vibrations touch your ear. That makes it unique in a way.' She continues: 'Someone asked me the other day, "What made you think that you could use sound when no-one else was?" Well, I got permission from Kurt Schwitters, who was already dead.' Working with so many different media hasn't been without difficulties though: 'People used to say to me, and it was a criticism, "Oh, you do so many different things." Artists were trained to do the same thing over and over again and it was thought to be a lack of consistency if you didn't do that. But I would say that I am very consistent. Possibly even more consistent than I'd like to be. I can't help it. You can try and make every piece of work different but they're always the same. The medium is often different. Or the formal approach is different. But we only have a limited amount of obsessions.'

I ask her how she chooses her medium. 'It's a question of matching the two together. The medium is selected because it's appropriate to the subject matter,' she says. 'That's the difference between the way I work and the way a lot of artists work. They make films. Or they use photography. I don't work like that. I've had to learn so many different media because I've had to find ways that are suitable. But it does mean that I don't produce work as quickly as some people do. It's never boring. I don't know what the next work will be.'

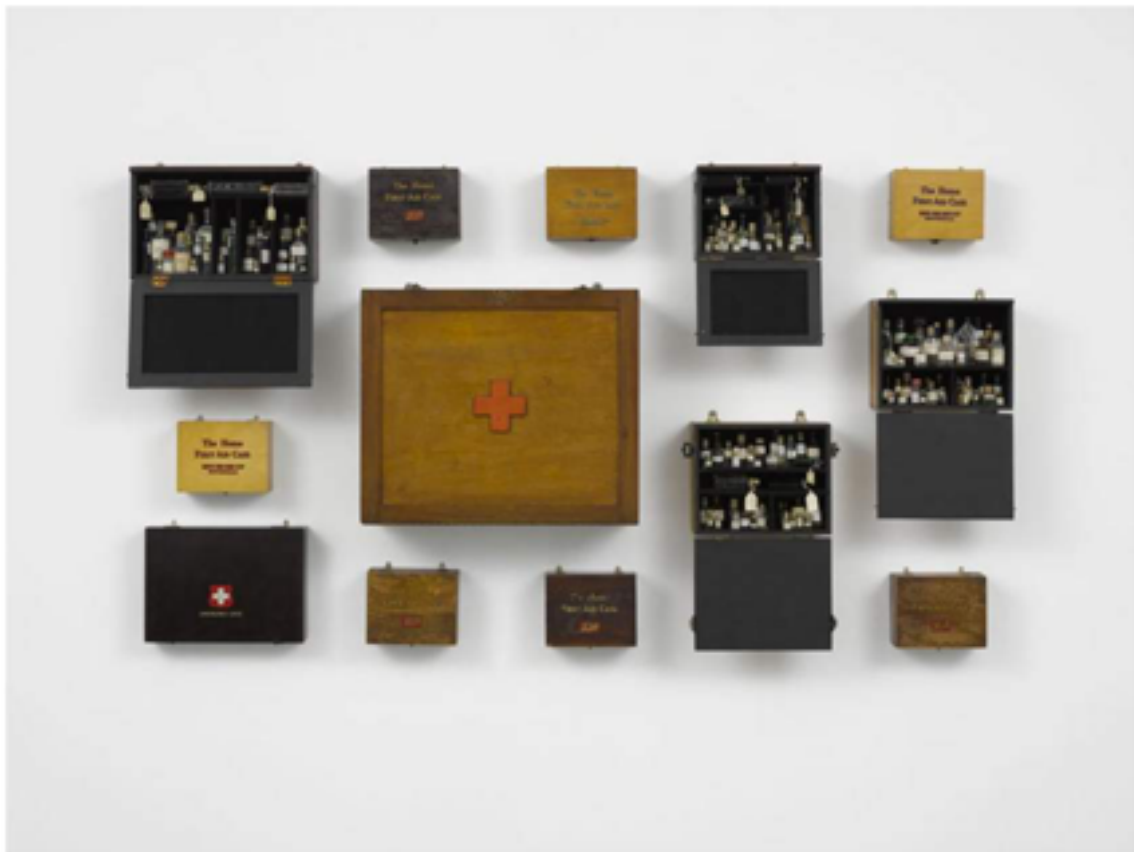


*Levitations: Homage to Yves Klein* (2008), Susan Hiller © Susan Hiller

Included in the Lisson's show are a number of little-seen works, many from her early years and many paintings in some guise, like those she made on wallpaper or her *Midnight* series from the 1980s – photobooth self-portraits she made abstract with paint and automatic writing. Painting is the medium that she is least associated with but she tells me she has never given up on it. 'The curator at the gallery wanted to show some of these because he thought that they were surprising. They don't surprise me. They are like my other work – they are only different because they are older.'

In other instances in the exhibition, there are what used to be paintings: *Painting Blocks* (1970–84), books of chopped-up painted canvases: ‘I turned the painting into sculpture, turned surface into mass’; and glass containers holding the ashes of burnt paintings in her *Relics* series which she began in 1972. ‘When I started burning my paintings,’ she says, ‘it was at the same time, or possibly earlier than, other artists started making a big deal about the death of painting. So they burned their student work, usually in a kind of statement about the end of painting. That wasn’t my idea at all.’ Hiller continues: ‘I was interested in transformation and the different stages of an object or a work. I was aware in museums, in our society, we’re constantly trying to keep everything the same. We’re always restoring it, keeping it in correct conditions, whereas in other societies this is not the case.’

‘In Africa, they used to create big wooden masks for ceremonies and then after the ceremony they would throw them away. It was no big deal. They could always make another one. The Eskimo do beautiful little carvings from whale ivory and so forth. There was a time when anthropologists visited them in the 1930s and ’40s and the floors of the igloos they used to live in – they had moved out to go hunting – were littered with tiny little gorgeous sculptures. They tried to explain to the anthropologists that the art was in the carving of the thing, not in the thing itself.’



*Emergency Case: Homage to Joseph Beuys* (2012), Susan Hiller. Courtesy Lisson Gallery; photo: Jack Hems; © Susan Hiller

This idea of transformation is often integral to Hiller's art and not just its subject matter – like the young children who are seized by telekinetic powers in her installation *Wild Talents* (1997); the bottles of holy water which promise transformation in her *Emergency Case: Homage to Joseph Beuys* (2012); or in *10 Months* (1977–79), where she documented her growing belly changing like a moon over the course of her pregnancy. She's not always content to see a piece as final. 'When you are an artist you can play games with your own work but when it enters a museum you are not allowed to change it.' It's something she sometimes finds frustrating. At the Lisson she has reconfigured her installation *Belshazzar's Feast* (1983–84), with screens stacked on top of one another like a bonfire rather than one lone television set showing flickering flames in a living room, as the Tate has in its collection. She has also delved back into her 'Rough Sea' postcard collection to make a new series *On the Edge* (2015), which presents 482 postcards from the stormy edges of Britain. She is endlessly fascinated by 'the whole idea of the miniature sublime. You go on holiday and you want to send some postcards to some people and instead of a beautiful view you get this really wild view. A small crack in the boring everydayness is this wildness of nature that you can unconsciously seek out if you go to a British seaside resort.'

Looking at the palette of works in the show, it's noticeable that one of the ways Hiller's practice has changed is in her use of colour, with more recent works increasingly iridescent. 'One of my very earliest memories is being taken to nursery school. I must have been three. In the doorway to the house was a bunch of prisms hanging up and the whole entrance was covered in rainbows. That was one of the first things I remember. I still feel that way about colour. Everyone loves that kind of effect. One of the sad things is the way we now get all this on-screen. When you look at that fake Tiffany light-shade over there' – she points to one of many lamps dangling from the ceiling of the bar – 'It would have been such a pleasure and thrill when the light came through it and you saw the red and the green. Now it's just kind of ordinary.'

Looking at a work in the show like *Enquiries/Inquiries* (1973–75), which compares English and American culture, I wonder if her experience as an outsider in Britain informed her practice as much as her background in anthropology? 'When I first started working,' she says, 'things that people might just think of as ordinary, struck me as unusual and fascinating. I do think as a general rule that artists need to go someplace else. Travel is good, but working in other places is really good. Just having to search for the right pencil in a foreign land is an interesting experience.'





Panel from *On the Edge*, (2015), Susan Hiller. Courtesy Lisson Gallery; © Susan Hiller

The romantic notion of Susan Hiller that I had concocted in my head was of a rummaging, collecting, hoarder-artist. I had read about her salvaging old medicine bottles from the banks of London's canals. In the middle of one of the Lisson's galleries are a number of Alfred West's *Split Hairs* works (last on show in the treasure trove that was Brian Dillon's 'Curiosity' exhibition). Just like the 'Rough Sea' postcards, which highlighted unheralded amateur artistry long before outsider art became fashionable (Hiller titled that 1972–76 project *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*), these bring to light West's intricate virtuosity. She found West's text pieces all made from human hairs on the street: 'The split hairs were being thrown away after Alfred died and the vitrine from the museum was as well, as they were renovating it. The museum looks boring now but they had wonderful old Victorian furniture. I believe Damien Hirst has bought most of it.'

However, she professes she's not a collector: 'When I was young I collected colour crayons, shells, cards, the usual things. I was never an obsessive. And I'm still not. *This* is a collection,' she says motioning around her. Although she does add: 'I have a few other things that I've collected that may turn into works eventually.' I had imagined her studio brimming with curios. Perhaps it isn't so surprising to find it so neat, with everything packed away on shelves in boxes with labels. The sight of them sitting there side by side, brings to mind the precise ordering and display of her artworks, like the bottles of holy water, each with their label noting where the water came from.

In addition to collecting, Hiller has also organised exhibitions as an artist-curator, a way of working that many have since copied. Her most well-known exhibition is 'Dream Machines', which explored art and altered states of consciousness at the Hayward Gallery in 2000. But in New York in 1981 she also co-curated with Suzanne Lacy a show called 'We'll make it up when we meet/aka LA-London Lab', which gathered female artists from LA and London. I ask her how that came about. 'I happened to be in New York and the British council or the Tate had organised a big show of British art of the '70s,' she tells me. 'It was all men of course. Martha Wilson who ran a very famous performance and exhibition place called Franklin Furnace came running up at the opening saying, "Where are all the women?" And I said, "Well, this is England and we don't mention that, it's not polite." And she said, "Well I want you to do a show with me."' Hiller selected the British participants. 'There were a number of fascinating artists in it – Rose English, Sally Potter...It was a huge success in New York but of course no one here knew anything about it.'



*Auras: Homage to Marcel Duchamp (2008), Susan Hiller © Susan Hiller*

In April, Tate Britain is holding a survey, 'Conceptual Art in Britain: 1964–1979'. Hiller and Mary Kelly are the only two female artists currently listed in the selection. I ask her what it was like working as a female artist at that time. 'I didn't have problems with other artists who were men,' Hiller says. 'The problems I had were with the administrators and curators, even when they were women. For years and years and years one didn't even mention feminism. No one wanted to discuss it. I was told by an English gallerist in the '80s that my commitment to feminism had ruined my career. Postcards, trivia, the things that really interest me are dangerous for a woman, because they reek of domesticity and craft.'

It took a long time for Hiller to come out as an artist, 'Because I never had any role models. I never heard of any female artists who were really wonderful.' I mention I read she had a portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe (the subject of a Tate Modern retrospective this year) hanging on her wall when she was younger. 'That was when I went to University,' she explains. 'But I didn't want to make work like Georgia O'Keeffe so there was this dilemma. There was a cultural sense that women's art was deficient. As someone who did anthropology I'll tell you that cultural bias runs very deep. And it's always backed up by the fact that people say there are no great women artists in other cultures. This is not true. It is something that is being worked on all the time by historians and anthropologists now, but when I was doing anthropology, you went out to a place and no one ever talked to the women; they talked to the men about the women so they got very weird ideas.'

Hiller describes the different attitude towards ceramics in China and Japan, where ceramicists were regarded as artists, to America, where native American ceramics were condescendingly regarded as craft. And in the context of her own work, she explains, 'When I made sewn canvases that was what women did, sewing. But when male artists made sown canvases at the same time, that was art [...] It was hurtful but at the time I thought it was hilariously funny. I only got angry a bit later on when I realised all the damage it was doing, not just to me but to all the other women I knew who were artists.'

But, although Hiller is a feminist, she has never wanted to be 'a feminist artist'. 'My feminism,' she says, 'is embedded in the work. It's not on the surface of it. Since I never wanted to make polemical art, which has been another thrust of women's art, I think my position has seemed a little complex to those who want to label work feminist or not.'

Has the situation changed sufficiently? 'I think we've caught up, maybe not as much as we should have. But it has certainly improved here,' she thinks. We talk about all the solo shows of female artists that have happened recently: Leonora Carrington, Sonia Delaunay, Hannah Höch. 'It's good, but they are being inserted. The canon of works for most people stays male. Eventually that will change though,' Hiller says. She tells me how much she enjoyed Tate Modern's Agnes Martin retrospective. 'Martin had a quiet life. I read someplace that she checked herself into an old people's home. She could have stayed there all day watching TV but she didn't. Every day she drove to her studio. She liked living there because they did the cooking and she didn't have to worry about all of that. That's great isn't it? I thought that is for me. That's a role model.'





Susan Hiller. Photo: Mark Lyon, 2014

**Isabel Stevens works at *Sight & Sound* and writes about art and film for *Aperture* and the *Guardian*.**



# Sublime digressions

On a visit to Weston-super-Mare in the early 1970s, the American artist Susan Hiller came across an old postcard depicting the Somerset resort lashed by rough seas. She soon found another in (and of) Brighton, and realized she had hit on a quaint vernacular genre with echoes of Romantic sublimity. In the hundreds of postcards that Hiller subsequently amassed for her installation “Dedicated to the Unknown Artists”, seafronts both garish and prim are assaulted by huge waves, masses of foam that menace the harbour-side hotels of Margate, Whitby, Herne Bay. Hiller arranged these images in grids, drew maps showing the locations of the coastal towns in question, and tabulated such details as caption and format: vertical or horizontal. Occasionally she revealed a handwritten inscription: “It has been really like this today, had splendid time”.

“Dedicated to the Unknown Artists” signalled Hiller’s commitment to a type of romantic conceptualism, a mix of organizing rigour, visual interest and intense emotional appeal. At four decades’ remove it is hard to recapture what an affront the latter two qualities were to the more austere conceptualists of the period. Hiller was accused of a sentimental attachment to the image per se, a Pop-derived reliance on mundane cultural artefacts and a ruinous attraction to affect. If such taunts seem absurd now, the artists and critics who voiced them were right in a way: Hiller’s art is usually

BRIAN DILLON

SUSAN HILLER

Lisson Gallery, London, until January 9

poised between ideas and embodiment, reason and ravishment.

At the Lisson Gallery there is a recent offshoot of the rough seas project in “On the Edge” (2015): a collection of 482 views of 219 locations, arranged in grids on fifteen panels. Hiller had a retrospective at Tate Britain in 2011, and the current show seems a more modest summation of her long-standing methods, themes and motifs. She moved to London at the end of the 1960s after an education in photography, linguistics, archaeology and anthropology; in retrospect she seems to have been well trained for the theoretical rigours of the day, but time and again her work proposed “adventures and deformations”, digressions from the conceptual to the material, emotional and (most famously) paranormal.

In 1999, in an essay on Andrei Tarkovsky, Hiller wrote: “I like to work with materials that have been culturally repressed or misunder-





The Guardian  
12 November 2015

theguardian

**Susan Hiller**  
Jonathan Jones on art

## Susan Hiller review – a bizarre, brilliant haunted house

★★★★

### Lisson Gallery, London

With UFO testimonies, ghost photographs and drawings made by literally splitting hairs, Hiller's new show is a fascinating gathering of countercultural beliefs and outsider truths that will leave you spooked

Jonathan Jones

Thursday 12 November 2015  
18.05 GMT



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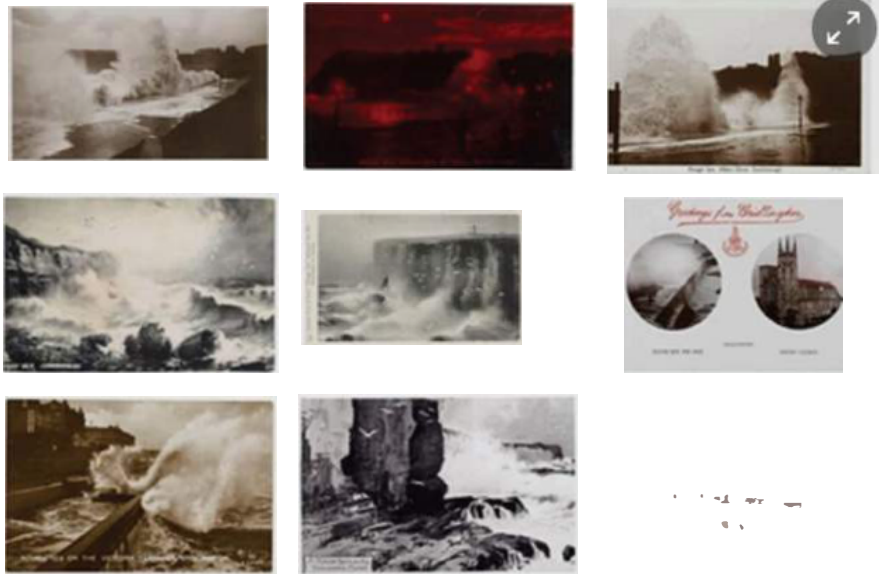


⌘ A place of troubled souls looking for spiritual consolation ... Susan Hiller's *Emergency case: Homage to Joseph Beuys, 1969-2012*. Photograph: Susan Hiller/Lisson Gallery

Something has been lost. It vanished years ago and no one can remember what it is. But still we search the skies and the shadows. Every mysterious light in the sky and each phantom in the camera lens is a glimpse of that nameless thing we lack.

Susan Hiller's modern world is a haunted house. It is not a smooth-running machine, a utopia, or a digital playground but a place of troubled souls looking for the spiritual consolations that once flooded everyday life but are marginalised now by our technocratic age. As a Russian woman laments in one of the many voices collected in her eerie exhibition at the Lisson Gallery, we were happier in the middle ages, when we had angels and demons.

A demonic fire haunts a pyramid of TV screens, bottles of holy water haunt old medical boxes, and the unique art of Alfie West (who made delicate drawings with strands of hair that he split with a razorblade) nestles in all its strangeness in a wooden cabinet. West died in 1985, and in 1997 Hiller displayed his outsider art at the museum of The Royal College of Surgeons. Restaged here, her cabinet of hairy curiosities is troubling and arresting, reflecting the ghost of a man who spent his life literally splitting hairs.



📷 Dangerous and exciting ... On the Edge (Rough Sea postcards map), 2015. Photograph: Susan Hiller/Lisson Gallery



Equally weird are outmoded postcards from around the coast of Britain, each of which portrays a savage, stormy sea crashing against rocks, piers or promenades. Clearly these postcards were popular in the past, perhaps with holidaymakers who liked to think their seaside destinations were dangerously exciting in bad weather. Hiller collected hundreds for her 1970s artwork *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* and in her new piece called *On the Edge* she uses 482 stormy postcards to map the entire coastline of Britain in an array of framed compositions at once comic, nostalgic and sublime.

In a nearby set of enlarged storm scenes Hiller has drawn a Turner-esque sun, in a jokey homage to romantic painting. But she finds her darkest mysteries far from the great tradition. She is a listener, an anthropologist who collects the bizarre and takes it seriously. From ghost photographs and pictures of people surrounded by their glowing “auras” to the testimonies of people who have seen UFOs, this is a gathering of countercultural beliefs and outsider truths.

Her sensibility is alert to the world and makes you see the world her way. After leaving the gallery I walked the streets of west London feeling spooked. The November light was spectral and what was that kid on the corner listening to on his white earphones? Voices from the other side of the universe.

● At [Lisson Gallery](#), London, from 13 November to 9 January 2016.

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# L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

*The Guardian*

15 November 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/15/susan-hiller-interview-self-doubt-is-always-present>

theguardian

Interview by **Kate Kellaway**

Sunday 15 November  
2015 09.00 GMT



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📷 Susan Hiller: 'To a young artist, I would say: just go day by day and see what happens. Don't worry about other people's judgment.' Photograph: Antonio Olmos for the Observer

I always wanted to be an artist. This was my fantasy as a child. I grew up in Coral Gables, Florida. During the time I lived there, it changed from being a self-contained community to a suburb of Miami. My mother trained as a psychometrist - an expert in psychological testing. My father was a businessman, rather a wild one who started and lost many businesses. They let me set up a corner of my bedroom as a studio. I had a work table with art supplies but didn't know any female artists and, when I got older, every time a female artist's name was mentioned, people would say, "Oh she was not very important" or, "She was a student of so and so" and, although I didn't realise it, this was very discouraging. I still liked drawing and making things but



“

When I was young, I'd get treated like a groupie, not an artist, by gallerists. You have no idea what it was like'

”

I picked up a booklet in my secondary school careers office called *Field Anthropology As a Career for Women* by Margaret Mead. I thought: this is for me. I have no regret about having studied it. Anthropology is wonderful but it is my rejection of it that influences my work. I limit myself to studying artefacts in our own society. But I have an anthropological curiosity about them. I don't believe in studying others. Who are others, you know? We are the others. Once you understand that, how could you be an anthropologist?

I came to London through love. I married an Englishman. We lived in New Orleans and, at a certain point, decided it would be nice for him to go back and introduce me to his parents and England. We arrived at the beginning of the 60s and it was so fantastically wonderful that we stayed. And I am still here and have a British passport and a son who is British. Compared to the United States, people were very politically aware, you had a national health system, council houses, rent control, a utopian view of society. There was nothing wrong with being poor, and that generation of artists, poets and musicians developed because of those conditions. It was the most creative time. Now they are tearing my studio down. This studio was put up years ago by Camden council when there was a completely different orientation towards life, politics, art, money and everything else. Now it is lent to businesses but it was supposed to be for artists.



📷 Emergency case: Homage to Joseph Beuys, 1969-2012 (13 wooden felt-lined first aid cabinets, containing bottles of holy water and vintage first aid supplies), by Susan Hiller. Photograph: Susan Hiller/Lisson Gallery



I don't want to talk about being old. When I was young, being a woman was a problem because people often did not realise I was the artist in my relationship. They would talk to him, not me. Or I'd get treated by gallerists and art lecturers as if I was a groupie, not an artist. You have no idea what it was like. It has changed so much. Now we have an extraordinary number of amazing female artists. When I was a young artist, I had incredible confidence on the one hand and total lack of confidence on the other. The lack of confidence comes from: how is this going to work out? And yet I so enjoyed doing what I wanted to do and the level of pleasure was so extreme, it overcame fear. But was I going to go on being poverty stricken for ever? I went for years without making any money through art and working in terrible jobs. I was a receptionist at the Skoda car factory and a temporary audio typist and eventually, after I had shown a few works, I was invited to teach and learned a lot through that.

To a young artist, I would say: just go day by day and see what happens. Don't worry about other people's judgment. If it resonates, then listen, otherwise pay no attention. Self-doubt is always present for artists because we have the job and the privilege of defining problems and then asking ourselves whether we have solved them.

I tend not to look backward except I have to say that, as you get older, looking forward becomes more complicated. When you are young, you have some idea of the future: you're going to get older, you're going to get better at what you are doing, you're going to be more in control of your life. When you get older, it is a bit like being an adolescent - every day is different. It is a strange thing. You are proceeding into the unknown, which is different from growing up and proceeding into the known.

I'm interested in occult powers, and if people find this ludicrous that is their problem. I'm not a true believer but these things are there and to say they aren't is ridiculous. I've recently made a piece called *Channels* about people relating their so-called near-death experiences. I am interested that these stories occur all over the world and always have done, and if we don't think that is interesting then we are very boring.

I don't think of myself in terms of decades. I can't take that seriously because the artists I know may be 70 or 80 but they don't fit the picture at all. I think artists stay younger, longer. I didn't "grow up" until my late 30s. I think being treated as a statistic is one of the horrible things about the way our culture operates. It would be different if each change in age were celebrated and if getting older were understood in terms of wisdom and you achieved some kind of higher stature, but at the moment it is thought to be all downhill.

I am not retrospective except that I keep going back to what I set out to do and wonder whether I am still doing it. Regrets? I do wish I had done more, better.

● At Lisson Gallery, London NW1 until 9 January 2016

LISSON GALLERY

*Sculpture Magazine*  
May 2012

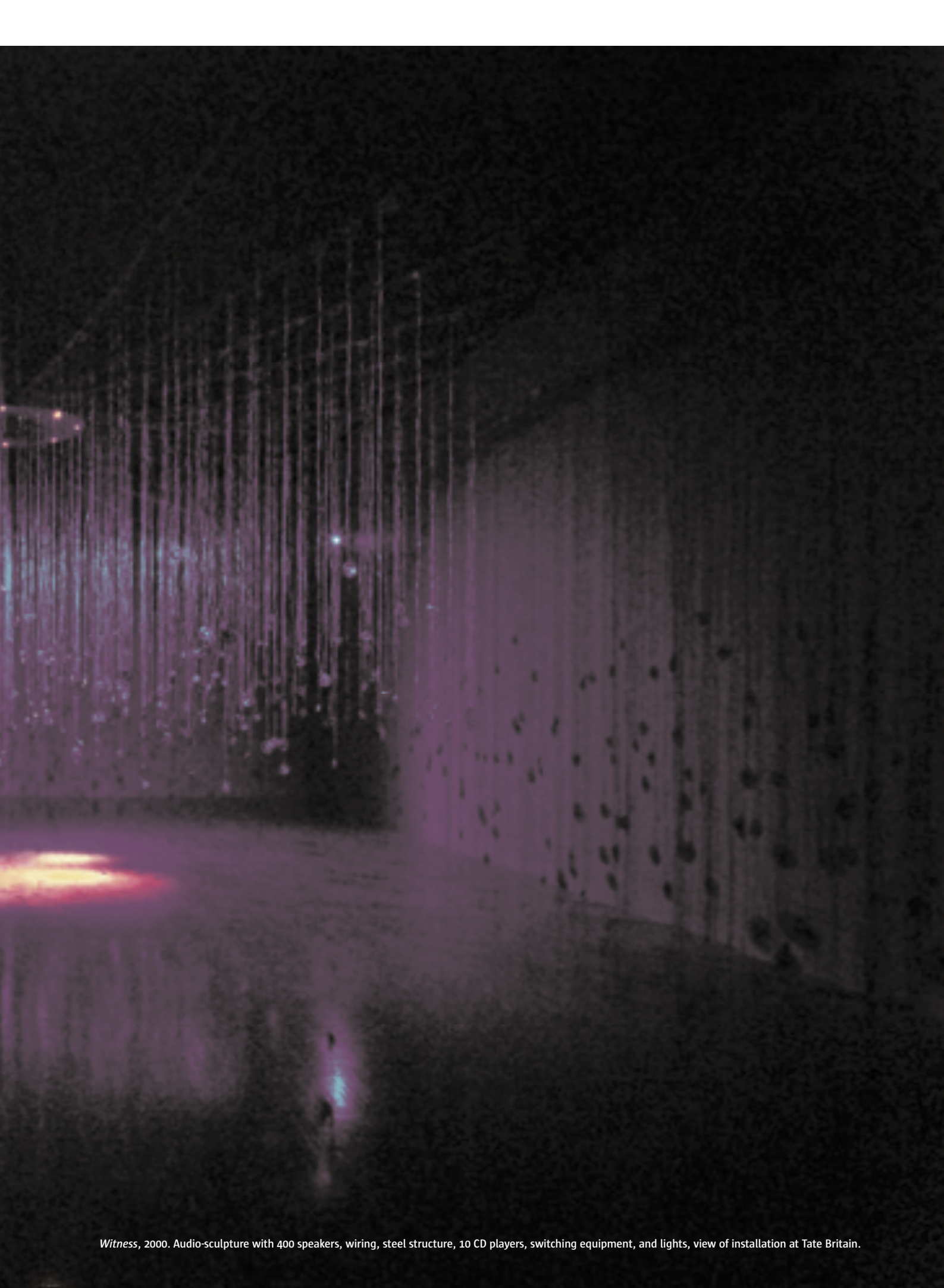
TODD WHITE ART PHOTOGRAPHY, LONDON. © SUSAN HILLER, COURTESY TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY, LONDON

# HAUNTINGS

A Conversation with

Susan Hiller





*Witness*, 2000. Audio-sculpture with 400 speakers, wiring, steel structure, 10 CD players, switching equipment, and lights, view of installation at Tate Britain.

BY INA COLE

A pioneer of multimedia installation art in the 1980s, Susan Hiller went on to create a complex body of work that subverts our understanding of reality, offering an intellectual investigation into the darkest recesses of the human imagination. Accepted arguments are swept aside as Hiller embarks on an enquiry into alternative modes of representation and explanation. Her multi-faceted use of materials and technology immerses the viewer in a world of imagery and sound, creating an altered state of consciousness that questions the very nature of existence.

**Ina Cole:** *You've lived in the U.K. since the 1970s, but what memories do you have of growing up in Florida, particularly in relation to your early interest in anthropology and art?*

**Susan Hiller:** I was born in Tallahassee but grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, until my parents moved back to Florida, to Coral Gables. As a child, I was always interested in art. My father, an amateur painter, was very supportive, and I had a corner of my bedroom set up as a workspace with art supplies. The anthropology came in high school when I found a fascinating booklet by Margaret Mead called *Anthropology as a Career for Women*. Mead, who was responsible for the first generation of women anthropologists, offered the field in a gendered way that seemed terrifically

interesting. At that point, I thought that being an artist was impractical; but at university in the U.S., I took art courses to keep up with it. So, my career as an artist was partially formed by a vaccination of anthropology, but that doesn't mean my work is anthropological. It's simply that my definition of art is anthropological, which leads me to be interested in certain things.

**IC:** *Part of your practice involves recycling paintings into three-dimensional forms or burning them and displaying their ashes in glass cylinders.*

**Monument, 1980–81. 41 photographs, park bench, and audio track tape, view of installation at Tate Britain, 2011.**



© SUSAN HILLER





**Belshazzar's Feast, 1983–84.** Video program and installation, view of installation at Tate Britain.

**SH:** There's an idea that sculpture's existence as an object is the most important way to define it. My work isn't committed to objecthood in quite the way of traditional sculpture. With the recycled works, I'm interested in how far you can go before something doesn't exist materially anymore—it's an investigation.

A few years ago, I was invited to participate in a conference on Henry Moore at the Sainsbury Centre because of a shared interest in ethnographic art, and I explained that my decision to leave anthropology had taken place during a lecture on African art. D.H. Lawrence criticized the "photographic" idea of sculpture, as opposed to the African commitment to "all-roundness" that characterizes Moore's work. My own commitment to the idea of sculpture being all in the round rather than flat against the wall has emerged in my installations in a fundamental but less obvious sense. Some installations document particularly well because you see them from one angle like a theater set, mine less so because they're in the round and use sound, which goes back to the very beginnings of my interest in African sculpture.

**IC:** *Monument is a signature work from the 1980s, a moving exploration of how people continue to live through the thoughts and voices of others. How did this work represent a breakthrough for you?*

**SH:** It was the first work I'd made like that. The photographs are inset into a wall and presented with a park bench and sound. The soundtrack is in analog format, so you can rewind the tape machine and my voice unwinds in your ear in a physical way, which doesn't happen with digital. People approach the work from a distance, move closer, stop, and read the panels, then notice that there's

a place for them to sit, listen, and become part of the ensemble. The memorials are from a London park, which is wonderful now, but was overgrown and melancholy then, and I photographed them because I found the texts poignant. People sat on benches with their backs to the plaques, and I realized then the fate of memorials or monuments of any kind. They're ignored, no one pays attention to them. The idea of this invisibility became important in the work.

**IC:** *Monument also reflects on our difficult relationship with temporal existence.*

**SH:** It was made up of one panel for each year of my life. The element of time, which is so important in sculpture, is fundamental in this piece because the subjects of the texts exist longer as representations than as living creatures. If I die and someone keeps



**Painting Block, 1971/84.** Oil on canvas, cut and bound with thread, 11.5 x 16.5 x 7.3 cm.



a photograph of me, I'll be around as a representation for other people, not as myself, which is curious. Our society is obsessed with conserving histories because we can't conserve ourselves, and I addressed this explicitly in the soundtrack. *Monument* is built up around the idea of memory and commemoration, but it doesn't provide answers; it just raises more questions. Empirical explanations don't satisfy our yearnings for continuity. There's a kind of Hollywood mishmash of cult fantasies and beliefs, a desperate groping for something that used to be taken care of by religion. A lot of work needs to be done to address these issues because the fantastic explanations posited by physics about the nature of reality don't match the boring, commonsense, empirical view that's pounded into society. When people wonder about other possibilities, others usually laugh at them. It's a big problem, and our society is in crisis. Do you feel that?

**IC:** Yes, I think we've reached a crisis point in terms of human consciousness. People still pursue answers, but these experiences tend to be individual and quite insular rather than of collective significance.

**SH:** In a recent work, *From Here to Eternity*, I explored the medieval idea of creating an altered state of consciousness by metaphorically undertaking the great pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The work is based on the idea that time and space can be experienced from a diagram. There are three slow, silent, video projections of three different labyrinths with little dots going round a pathway, similar to an early computer game graphic or a Frank Stella painting. There's something very interesting about the concept of a labyrinth as opposed to a maze. A maze is a place to get lost; a labyrinth has only one right way to go, but it's complicated, and you often seem to be going backwards or in the wrong direction. You think this can't be right, but it is, and that's why it's such a great statement about life. If you follow the moving dots, you'll feel your attention moving from one side of your brain to the other in a very physical way. My work is increasingly designed to create

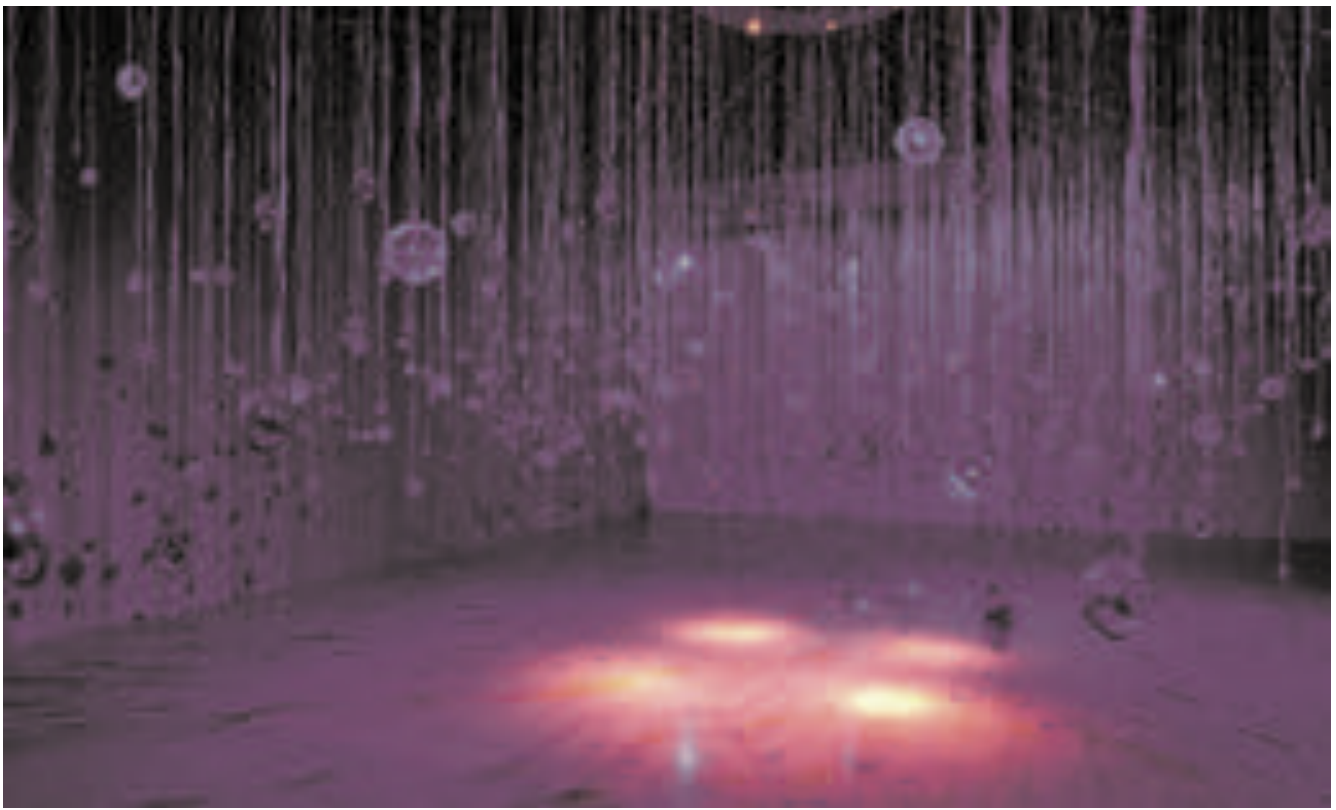
**An Entertainment, 1990. 4 synchronized video projections and quadrasonic sound, view of installation at Tate Britain.**

situations in which people begin to understand something about themselves, and this work does it without text or sound.

**IC:** In *Belshazzar's Feast*, the central element is a television screen set within the configuration of a living room. In movies, the screen frequently serves as a paranormal device whose victims become obsessed with occult transmissions. Here, it creates tension through its dual nature as an accepted everyday object that nonetheless has the power to subsume us all. Can you discuss the ideas behind this work and explain why the screen shows footage of flames?

**SH:** Communication at a distance, starting with the radio and the telephone, opened up new possibilities of spookiness in the history of Western culture. *Belshazzar's Feast* is based on newspaper articles about apparitions appearing on screens after a broadcast had ended. Marshall McLuhan had a very rational explanation about the lure of television when he said that it had replaced the living room hearth. Deconstructing television isn't my primary interest; I'm interested in the phenomena of reverie that can happen regardless of what program is on, which is similar to what happens if you stare into a fire because of the little blips of light. If you're good at imagining, you'll see pictures and make up a story. It's probably the origin of image-making. The biblical story of *Belshazzar's Feast* describes a collective hallucination in which everyone sees a hand writing a message of doom. The relationship of that story to my piece is that numerous people rang the BBC after the close of broadcast saying that they could still see images, which they found very spooky. This work is about projection, which can be a source of great pleasure if you enjoy imagination, otherwise it's scary.

**IC:** *An Entertainment* offers a moment of high drama, presenting itself as a visual and acoustic shock to the senses. Here, the spectator



**Witness**, 2000. Audio-sculpture with 400 speakers, wiring, steel structure, 10 CD players, switching equipment, and lights, detail of installation at Tate Britain.

*becomes the victim, boxed within a four-screen installation. Is it important for you that viewers become complicit in the interpretation of a work, that by experiencing it they become something like collaborators?*

**SH:** In *An Entertainment*, I wanted to put the adult in the place of the child, and the only way to revive the hypersensitivity of a child was to make things big and make us feel small. All the repetitions in the piece are from Punch and Judy shows, and because the puppets perform from a box, I thought, “Let’s put us in a box.” I invented a projection system that surrounds the viewer with images coming from all sides. I went to many puppet shows when my son was growing up, and I’d hear the littlest children crying and wanting to leave, and their parents saying, “Oh, look at Mr. Punch, isn’t he funny” or “Don’t be so silly, there’s nothing frightening here.” I realized that denial is a ritual in our society—we’re training to deny our own experiences and laugh at our fears. *An Entertainment* has the attractiveness of a certain kind of fear because it triggers childhood memories in which you’re terrified of something that turns out not to be real. In childhood, you don’t anticipate, and with *An Entertainment*, the sound and image suddenly come from behind, forcing you to turn around. This uncertainty is a deliberate part of the piece. With my installations, the degree of involvement and three-dimensionality increases through time, starting with *Monument*, which you can just walk past, to *An Entertainment* and *Witness*, where they become greater.

**IC:** In *Witness*, hundreds of suspended microphones emit an insane cacophony of voices recalling stories of alien encounters from across the world. In the past, people looked to religious icons, while contemporary witnesses often see spectral or extraterrestrial phenomena. Do you think this phenomenon represents a

*yearning for something greater than ourselves, something to make our earthly existence more tolerable?*

**SH:** In the past, there was a context for heightened psychological experiences, which could be translated into known iconic figures and therefore made acceptable. We’re now out on a limb with this because society is more and more on the surface; we don’t have metaphysical ponderings and depth. Freud said that the lost pleasures of life on this earth are compensated for by a belief in occult theories. He saw that there was a need and was sympathetic, even though he didn’t believe. That’s the place to be, tolerant but skeptical, and I think more work needs to be done on these issues by psychologists and scientists.

In *Witness*, the UFO experiences usually begin when someone is driving through empty countryside at night—the monotony triggers receptivity. It’s hard to talk about these experiences, so people create straightforward narratives. Was it an angel, a flying saucer, or just a bright light? It depends on the person, and these stories have a very long history. William Blake saw angels. Are we supposed to mock Blake? No, I don’t think so. So what do we do with the stories?

**IC:** *Perhaps science ignores the workings of the subconscious mind at its peril.*

**SH:** Yes, and because we don’t allow people to have regular paths to unconsciousness, certain issues become big social problems. Everyone yearns for peace, but we have more war than ever because unconsciously something’s happening and we can’t get at it. It would require a fundamental shift of focus to change things, and I can’t see how we’re going to achieve that. In *Witness*, these experiences erupt in consciousness when the person is in a state of receptivity. We have this capacity to see the most beautiful things, which may be there or not. Scientists tell us that there are nine dimensions, that everything’s happening simultaneously, but how are we supposed to put that together with the stupidity with which we’re brought up? We’re the prisoners of our senses,





we have bodies, which is why people invented the idea of the soul. I don't think we're ever going to resolve it, but it's interesting to provide experiences that allow people to think about it.

**IC:** *The Last Silent Movie* highlights 400 extinct languages, and *The J. Street Project* is a collection of 303 street signs incorporating the word "Jew." Both works reflect on traces of individuals cast aside by societal conventions. Is our civilization becoming more and more homogenized, with individual traits conveniently erased?

**SH:** You could say that I'm erasing the individualism of streets and languages by collecting them, but I'm not—I'm pointing out their existence and uniqueness. In *The Last Silent Movie*, the decision not to have pictures is important because it takes away one of our senses. We listen to voices, and every voice is unique

like a fingerprint. We have a closeness when hearing the recorded voice of someone who's dead, because the voice is still living, although that wasn't my first intention, which was to look at the phenomenon of disappearing languages. The fact that languages are collected and shut away in academic archives is very peculiar. So much effort is made by anthropologists and linguists to record languages as the last speakers become old and fade away. We should be asking, "Why are these languages dying? What's going on?" But we never ask these questions because we're stuck on the implications of our own way of life, which is eating up the rest of the world. *The Last Silent Movie* and *The J. Street Project* are about how to make that disappearance visible.

**IC:** From the Freud Museum responds to Freud's lifelong passion for collecting. The installation, which you've referred to as "an archive of misunderstandings," includes 50 archaeological storage boxes filled with mementos, relics, and talismans that you acquired. Can you elaborate?

**SH:** Freud collected everything, and his collection was the kind that any cultivated European of his period with sufficient income would have acquired. I'm not saying that it wasn't personal, but it's typical of a middle-class man of his time, whereas the things I collected have no value other than that they are perplexing or curious. The misunderstandings are of various kinds. Each box has its own title referring to a particular discourse—art history, anthropology, psychoanalysis. They're juxtaposed randomly so that the different perspectives problematize each other, with each individual box deciphering other kinds of misunderstandings. One box holds colored salt from a mine near Auschwitz that contains

**Above:** *Hand Grenades*, 1969–72. Ashes of paintings in glass jars, rubber stoppers, labels, and Pyrex bowl, 11 x 18 x 18 cm. **Below:** *From the Freud Museum*, 1991–96. Vitrine, boxes, and video, view of installation at Tate Britain, 2011.





**Home Nursing: Homage to Joseph Beuys, 1969–2011. Vitrine, boxes, and video, view of installation at Tate Britain, 2011.**

beautiful carvings made by the miners and a ballroom with semi-transparent walls that glow when lamps are placed behind them. It was used as a TB sanatorium because of the pure air and as a facility for advanced technologies because there was no dust. One of these advanced technologies was the basis for a Nazi armament factory using slave labor. Hundreds of people died, but the tour and the tourist map of the mine don't mention the slave labor camp. I found a book about this mine with a chapter on the camp. So, I placed a photocopy of the tourist map in the box with these lovely orange, green, and gray samples of salt, drawing the location of the slave labor camp in red. That kind of juxtaposition is what the boxes are about.

Another box contains a praying mantis in a painstakingly made glass coffin, with a big red glass jewel set in the top. I juxtaposed this with an excerpt from a 1970s House of Lords debate on UFOs, because the words "mantis" and "mantic" relate to prophecy and supernatural knowledge. I thought of someone placing a praying mantis in a coffin, thinking it was a creature from outer space, ceremonially treating it as though it were holy. The fact that the House of Lords had an official debate on UFOs was irresistible to me. A touch of humor had to enter into this work from time to time, which relates to Freud's idea of the joke, the misreading, and the omission. The individual boxes work by association, and viewer associations probably override my own.

**IC:** You've created a series of "Homages" to 20th-century artists and writers including Marcel Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, and Joseph Beuys. All were radical thinkers, but why did you select them?

**SH:** I'm interested in what's hidden, left out, or continues to haunt us. The history of Modernist art includes elements from occult traditions that are underplayed or ignored. These artists and others of their generation transmitted occult concepts down to the present. For many years after he gave up retinal painting, Duchamp

questioned for a vehicle. It isn't generally acknowledged that he went through various occult movements before finally ending up with alchemy. He was interested in human auras, and *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel* portrays his friend, a radiographer, with auras. Duchamp deliberately conflated the idea of the occult aura with the light of radiography. I wanted to take that further and explore what that means in a digital age.

As a student of psychology, Gertrude Stein had conducted experiments on automatic writing, which she spent the rest of her life denying. Behind the New York Public Library is a sculpture of her by Jo Davidson. It's a conventional figurative sculpture, but he's exaggerated her fatness, which I also wanted to reflect on in my piece. I found a wonderful, rounded piece of art deco furniture, which I stacked with books on automatic writing, books on using the other side of your brain, and books about new concepts of the human being as a result of some advanced thinking at the time. So *Homage to Gertrude Stein* emphasizes the implications of an aspect of her work that tends to be suppressed or ignored.

Beuys haunts contemporary art, and his controversial pose as a shaman mediating between two worlds has both seduced and repelled people. I was interested in representing how he tried to stay on the edge of that by using bottles of holy water. All waters are in constant circulation, so water from one place probably isn't any more holy than water from another. The U.K. has a super-abundance of holy springs, and I started collecting the water years ago. This work situates the holy waters in a felt-lined vitrine and connects Beuys to a current of popular belief that is both credulous and skeptical, because even though people return from official sites like Lourdes with water, I don't believe they think it's actually magic. Beuys was trying to create a bridge between some of the things we've been talking about, but his shamanistic pose and biography as a celebrity create a problem. It's an encouragement for credulity rather than for thinking.

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# LISSON GALLERY

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### Voices from the sky

Lost languages, dreams of UFOs, dead prime ministers - Susan Hiller's work is haunted by transmissions from other worlds. **Adrian Searle** tunes in at her new Tate exhibition



Flying saucers...  
a trailer listens to  
Susan Hiller's *Witness*

PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAY FOR THE GUARDIAN

**Box of delights**

Sam Leith on Sky Atlantic, page 28

**Never kiss with a cold**

John Gordon Sinclair, page 23

**Monday night misery**

Stuart Jeffries on last night's TV, page 26

The art of the 20th century was littered with all sorts of nonsensical ideas - from theosophy to the fifth dimension, from skewed modernist ideas of progress and universality to quasi-religious calls to faith in the artist's shamanistic and magical powers. "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths," wrote Bruce Nauman, in a 1967 neon sign.

Nauman himself never believed in any such thing about mystic truths, but one thing we can be sure of is that the wish to believe persists. We think that art can change us and change the world. That it has secrets, that it is an oracle.

Artists themselves are not immune to bunk. Sometimes it helps them. The things they do are something else. But think of the hushed reverence one encounters in the Rothko room at the Tate, or the simpering new age ceremonies that take place in his chapel in Houston. At least, unlike the movie world, there aren't too many high-profile artists who admit to being Scientologists.

Susan Hiller's work often deals with strange phenomena, misplaced belief, arcane rituals, mistaken ideas, collective and individual hallucinations. This in part accounts for her work's appeal. Even if we are not all suckers under the skin, the power of the irrational is a big draw. For all her decades as an artist, Hiller's curiosity in the world remains that of the anthropologist she once trained as.

Her fascination with UFO encounters, with the presence of ghosts on the TV screen, with the voices of the dead in the radio ether, with levitations, automatic writing and other phenomena is more than academic. One must, I think, have to see it all as metaphor, as

material. All this would be fun were it not for the fact that Hiller's work has, at certain moments, achieved something much richer. When in the 1970s, she got her friends to sleep inside fairy rings in fields and record their dreams, the results were as uninteresting as any dream left uninterpreted. One of her subjects records a dream in which he tries to hide his stash of hash when the police raid his house. Spooky, or stoned, or what? And you can't be responsible for the banality of other people's dreams. Hiller was just - one might say - channelling her time, as well as the old folklore about these naturally occurring circles of fungi.

Her cabinet of bottled holy water, from the Ganges and Greece, Willesden and Wales, is collected in old glass medicine bottles reclaimed from canalside middens and river mud. These little bottles might themselves have once have contained laudanum, poison, or snake-oil potions that promised a cure for all your ills. Dedicated to Joseph Beuys, who professed to believe in the healing powers of such everyday and abject substances as fat, felt and beeswax, Hiller points up the ridiculous idea that some water is inherently precious. But hers is not an entirely materialistic view. What interests her is that we put our faith in, and that includes art itself. Any art worth the name reflects on its own condition, as well as on the world itself, and Hiller's work at its best does just this. When she cut up and incinerated her early paintings, she gave them a fetishistic, relic-like quality. There's nothing there but ash and canvas. If there was a radical spirit to her gesture, it has evaporated with the years, and that becomes metaphoric, too.

Roni Horn's columns of melted glacier water in her Library of Water in Iceland, Shirin Neshat's photographs



**Swimming in front of your eyes** ... (above) **Magic Lantern**, accompanied by a supposed recording of the voices of Winston Churchill and James Joyce; (below right) **The Tao of Water: Homage to Joseph Beuys**

of women with Persian calligraphy written on their faces and hands, Jane and Louise Wilson's early films all seem to owe a debt to Hiller, just as Hiller has paid homage to Beuys, Yves Klein, Duchamp and others. Art, it has been said, is always a homage and critique to what came before. If it's any good, it also leads to what comes later, wittingly or not. In this way, the artist (and it's true of writers and composers, too) is a medium, and one who is always haunted.

There are ways in which Hiller's work is a consideration, and even an acting out, of male ideas about "the feminine". Her installation *Pai-Girls*





takes footage of commercial films dealing with girls with terrifying psychokinetic powers – causing model trains to crash, tumblers to move, inanimate objects to fly and things to burst into flames. These movies, and Hiller's art, play on the potent male stereotype of the feminine dark continent, and women as being in touch with intuition, as superstitious, as somehow, even, evil.

Her well-known video installation *An Entertainment* from 1990 has scenes from *Punch and Judy* shows roaring round the walls: garish colour, the awful voice of Mr Punch, the terrible violence, the hurdy-gurdy music, all shot and projected in sneaky low-resolution video that would be almost unthinkable now. The images erupt and decay around us in a granular fizz of winking dots of colour, as if some ectoplasmic substance were being hurled on the walls. The whole thing

**It is extremely sad to hear these last speakers of Manx. Ngarrindjeri and Xokleng. Voices disappearing, words falling**

feels like some sort of summoning of violence.

Another well-known work uses the recordings made by the Latvian psychologist Konstantin Raudive, who in the 1960s discovered what he thought were the voices of Winston Churchill, the poet Mayakovsky and James Joyce, which he claimed he had recorded on a tape recorder left running in a soundproofed room. These fuzzy, disquieting fragments of voices, buried in the electrostatic boom and sizzle, with their original, plummy-voiced English commentary, are replayed beside a slideshow of constantly shifting and overlapping discs of coloured light, demonstrating the properties of colour. What we see and hear bear no direct relation to one another. But the optical effects swim in our eyes, persist on our retina, and make us see things that aren't there, just as we hear voices of the long dead that also aren't present. Or are they? What's out there and what's in the mind? Witness, meanwhile, is a room full of clamouring voices emitted from dangling little speakers that look like flying saucers. The voices recount lights in the sky, the alien ships above. What we are really listening to are wishes and projections, fears and dreams.

The best comes last, as we hope it might. In *The Last Silent Movie*, we watch a black screen. Text is the only image, the translation of recordings of speakers of vanishing (and some now extinct) languages from all over the world. This is overwhelmingly sad, to hear these last speakers of Manx, Ngarrindjeri, Potawatomi, K'oro and Xokleng. Voices disappearing, words falling.

Words fall again, watching Hiller's 2003-5 *I Street Project*, which I wrote about in the *Guardian* five years ago. Hiller travelled Germany, photographing and filming every street sign and location still prefaced by the word *Aden* (Jew), 303 *Adenstrassen* and *Adenstrassen*, back alleys and country lanes, city streets and unmade paths. Birds sing, cars go by. It rains, and there's a gorgeous sunset. The camera is unweaving.

Nothing happens in the film. It has already happened, in bucolic villages and city side-streets. The film lasts a long time. It dwells on the past's persistence in the present. Headscarfed Muslim women fold away some washing. A bloke stumbles on the roadside verge to avoid a passing truck. Pensive scenes of everyday modern Germany, in which the unseen is palpable, witnessed to cumulative, crushing effect. Haunted is the only word.



Susan Hiller is at Tate Britain, London (201), until 15 May. Details: 020 7947 8333. Get two tickets for the price of one at [guardian.co.uk/events](http://guardian.co.uk/events)