

File 4

Critical Text

Written by: Elle Loui August

**In response to James
Beckett *Dowsing Schools:
Preliminary Findings and
Corresponding Survey Kit*;
g. bridle *the Retreat: Flight
Forward* at Artspace
May–June 2014**

I am looking to where the wall meets the floor, where the olive green of a painted backdrop alights in a casual smear along the floor's edge. On either side of where I stand, an ensemble of survey, map making and excavation implements are arranged, either anchored on islands of concrete paving stones, or at an incline between floor and wall. At intervals, a voice sounds into the space from either of two reel-to-reel tape machines installed on each of the corner walls of the gallery's main room. There are two voices, two timbres. Set beneath the tape machine at the south of the gallery, two low vitrines hold collections of dowsing ephemera. Within the left, a series of texts, the titles of which gloss various topics of dowsing and its practical applications in surveying and archaeology. Within the right, a selection of dowsing rods of varying style, origin and form.

Enacting the solemn permanence of a museological display, the objects which constitute the 'survey kit—shovel, mallet, poles, various markers, an archaic Plane Table...—are neither activated nor entirely at rest, cast in postures which bring our attention to the *use* and deployment of these objects as tools of labour, and more specifically the work of measurement, mapping and the quantification of space. In contrast, the *tools* of dowsing are held at a remove, reclining quiver-less behind glass, any vitality they may possess alluded to with the inclusion of their purchase price printed on

small pieces of card, signaling them as objects of trade with the adherent energy of their passing through the machinations of internet trading sites and postal systems.

During the artist talk, which followed the opening of the exhibition, Beckett defined the formal components of the work as an *image*, the dimensions and relations between objects and surfaces remaining intact in each subsequent iteration. To think of the work in this way evokes a different form of image distribution than we are currently accustoming ourselves to, in which the folding back of speed and surface inhabit our expectations of visual language. Here, a sense of weight and passage, the movement across air, land and sea, and the time accrued in the series of collations, purchases and consignments which have formed the assembly of this ‘image’ and reproduced it elsewhere. This making-dense of space and time also calls attention to the hand, foregrounded in the work through both suggestion and exclusion, lending the potential to read the work as a composition of labours, that of the dowers, factory fabricators, technicians, artisans, and the artist. The inclusion of hand-wrought replicas fabricated in the artist’s studio within the ‘survey kit’ however, suggests the emphasis to be less angled toward a politically weighted critique of labour. Rather the *techne* of the skilled amateur or enthusiast is foregrounded and underscored by the value and beliefs particular to these

structuring objects and their cultural *milieu*.

The voices speak into the assembly of objects. Two male voices, augmented by the occasional metallic meeting of dowsing rods, offer brief, excerpted ruminations extracted from field surveys of unnamed schools in the Netherlands. As with each doubling within the work there is an unequal meeting, and the utterances of the two 'British' dowsers, diverge in their interpretations of craft; mystical assertion on the one hand and a pragmatic earth-science outlook on the other. In between descriptions of the visible features of the environment and of their own actions and movements, the first dowser affirms the persistence of energies throughout time, speaking of the residue of negative events or abuses of power radiating through new structures. The second reduces his interpretations to either yes/no, or numerical sensory data, focusing on the 'tangible' intangible objects. These are partial records, which shift between each speaker. We are suspended in our belief of their belief, circling back into the materiality of the tape machines as they rewind, reset, replay, announcing themselves as the mechanism replaying the past.

This turning in reflects the diagrammatic sensibility of the work. Interrupted flows of narrative or meaning pass through objects, cycling back into themselves to deflect across the ensemble in echoes of

similarity and difference. A centrifuge of *techne*, *episteme*, *doxa*. Figuring the relationship of hand and eye to space, accompanied by the aural ghostings of speculative and partial knowledges, suggest the sympathetic notion of conjuring. Conjuring meaning, conjuring space, with belief as the bridge or mechanism of transitional suspense between the past and present, between perception and action in the world. Even should this refer solely to museological exhibition histories or to the narrative and value accumulated by objects in their passage through these institutions, it is an uncomfortable assertion given the three colonial contexts invoked: Britain, Holland and our own.

A sense of heaviness is the counterweight to the mind's movement within the work. From the assumed anthropological tone, through the materials themselves, a rigidity and weightedness pervades. The pools of concrete pavers adhere to the floor, their density the anchor for the objects formed of metal and wood, this despite the possible suggestion of opening or overturned ground. The brass pendulum, which hangs stabilising the plane table, and the dowsing rods are stationary, and although the aural environment fluctuates, the voices of the two men remain moored to the technologies of reproduction, to the mines and minds which have constituted these machines, and to the repetitions structured by the author. I note here that

in this work, tool, technique and tradition all intersect through a theme of masculinity, perhaps exemplified in one of the reference titles from the vitrine '*Dowsing, One Man's Way*'.

Light is refracted across the threshold of *the Retreat* through a glass prism at the base of the composite piece *black work 3*. Slender beams of light form an ephemeral meeting point within the object, a situated responsiveness, yet if so, one which circulates this charge or holding of the space back to itself as a form of capture, toying with the status of a talisman. With this object, as with the other pieces that comprise *the Retreat*, thought may lift from the physical encounter with the object, to ricochet among associated words or actions, passing again as notions back into the object's gesture. In this initiatory moment the idea 'talisman' meets the title *black work 3*, a term denoting a style of embroidery in which black silk is worked on white cloth. This association summons a stitch, the joining in loose alignment of two tonal opposites, and returning to the idea of a talisman, a seal or, to seal.

black work 3 presents a *rendezvous* between two found objects; above a slim black cigarette holder and below; the glass prism, its form leaning to a life as a stopper for perfume. The two are invisibly joined, their suggestive sensory lives as carriers of smoke, breath and scent are sealed in an interior rhythm, their surfaces punctuated. Circular bands interrupt that of the cigarette holder, and in the bevelled surface of the glass form, it is difficult to ascertain if the taupe hue is caught within the glass itself or if it is collected from one gallery and

passed silently into the other with a geometrical precision. The sealing of the stopper to pipe accentuates their 'openness' as objects, the passage of smoke and breath through one, the transmission of light and scent from the other, evokes the bodily capture of each vaporous substance, yet alludes to these as disembodied, ideated or separate senses, open to new arrangements or synesthetic effects.

Hollow/hallow. At the end of the left corridor the large photographic work *bec de lièvre* is installed into a recess in the wall. Invisibly mounted into the architecture, the image emerges as if haloed by light, a faint radiance occurring between the space of the wall and the image's edge. Charging again the dual sense of binding and openness, the image appears as a fissure or partial opening to a large storage tank, the stained milky tones of its exterior, flush with the colour of the gallery walls, suggest for a brief moment the silver of a birch tree. Yet it is not a true opening or passage. In drawing closer to the work the rust tones of an interior become visible, there is no seeing through the image, no reveal. The image yoked to its means of installation now offers and withdraws, creating a circular vibration which echoes and absorbs the 'cleft' suggested in the title, to *cleave* being both to adhere and to split. Our eye cannot touch a point of transition, we are out of phase with the anonymous containment suggested. It could be the

ghosts of Plato and Duchamp behind there.

In *the Visit* a small fly is caught in motion, depicted moving away from the viewer into the blue of the photograph. Smaller in scale and installed in the same manner at the end of the right corridor gallery, the sense of vibration effected by the incursions into the wall and the circulation of these works into their own logic is performed more loosely. The subject is turned away from the visitor, the shimmer of the fleeting passage is the paradox of its capture. A *rendezvous* hollowed out in the sky between the depicted, the viewer and the distinct space which each inhabits.

Having encountered *the Retreat* in previous years, I have a brief familiarity with the syntax of the ‘collection’, of its confluences and mercurial turns. The reduced palette of this recent emanation, allows a subtle rhythm to accumulate across the shifts in scale and hue, the invitation to evaluate these transitions as an echo in one’s own passage—passing, drawing close, holding at a distance—is augmented by the latent difficulties of the space. This softness of mood refers back into the fog of my recalling past iterations, a sense of correspondence with the immanent collection itself, persisting out of step with chronological time and tangible space, continuing to emerge in partial fusions as it simultaneously draws away.

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