

SUSAN HILLER

DIVIDED SELF

cur.: François Aubart

16.2.–20.4.2025

Born in 1940 in the United States, Susan Hiller moved to London in 1970, where she died in 2019. In a career spanning almost 50 years, she became interested in automatic writing, dreams, postcards, television programmes, magic, encounters with extraterrestrials and many other vernacular practices, guided by a quest for alternatives to the supposedly objective neutrality of science. As a woman in a patriarchal world, attentive to the fate of social minorities and non-Western cultures, Hiller notes that what is repressed is relegated to the realm of the subjective and the sensitive, considered to be negligible. This is what led her to take an interest in minor, low-profile, socially marginalised subjects, which she approaches not as objects to be examined with detachment but as phenomena to be experienced. Susan Hiller's work celebrates subjectivity, elevated to the level of knowledge. The artist claimed to be transformed by each encounter with cultural artefacts, and thus to be fragmented, unstable, traversed by diverse voices. As a result, she developed a body of work of great formal diversity, far from the stable unity on which universal knowledge and identifiable authorship are based. This exhibition does not present her work chronologically but aims to highlight certain preoccupations that have accompanied it.

PARKETT RESEARCH

After studying anthropology, Hiller developed a body of work that distances itself from academic methodologies and the supposed neutrality of scientific observation. However, it is nourished by research. In 1973, the artist organised meetings to discuss dreams and ways of describing them. Subsequently, a group of people spent three days in a place in Hampshire known for its fairy circles. The nights were followed by workshops on mapping dreams. This project was one of the sources of the book *Dreams: Visions of the Night*, co-authored with David Coxhead and rapidly translated into several languages. It demonstrates an encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject and places great emphasis on the role of nocturnal experiences for understanding daytime life. In 2000, Hiller organised *Dream Machines*, a major exhibition in London on the role of dreams and altered states of consciousness in contemporary art. 2012 she assembled *The Dream and the Word*, a compendium on dream life in western culture. In 1991, she edited and compiled the volume *The Myth of Primitivism*, now considered a milestone in the critique of Eurocentrism. It draws on art history, sociology and anthropology to show that the notion of primitivism, created by Western culture, is marked by racism and colonialism. Finally, her numerous texts, interviews and lectures have been published in two collections. The influence of research on Hiller's work can also be seen in the postcards that she classifies. They depict raging seas striking the shores and projecting spectacular sprays of water. A classic motif of the British coastline, this repetition is the fruit of an industry. Produced by women who coloured these images by hand, they are the anonymous artists to whom the title of the works *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1982) refers.

EVENTS

Guided tours

– Sun 16.2.2025, 14:00 (fr)

Guided tour in French of the exhibition by Susan Hiller, with François Aubart, curator of the exhibition

– Thurs 3.4.2025, 18:30 (de)

Guided tour in German of the exhibitions by Susan Hiller and Denis Savary, with Selma Meuli, curator KBCB

Art at noon

Lunch with the Kunsthaus team: short tour followed by a snack (with Epicerie Batavia)

– Fri 4.4.2025, 12:15 (de/fr)

CHF 15.–

Registration until the day before: info@kbc.ch



Kunsthaus Biel Centre d'art Bienne

Opening hours

Wed 12:00–18:00

Thurs 12:00–20:00

Fri 12:00–18:00

Sa&Sun 11:00–18:00

Thanks

Gabriel Coxhead, Maxime Lassagne, Andreas Leventis, Janosch Perler, Andrew Price, Lorraine de Thibault; Frenetic-Vintage-Furniture, Biel/Bienne

Das Kunsthaus Biel ist Teil vom Pasquart.
Le Centre d'art de Bienne fait partie de Pasquart.

Das Kunsthaus Biel wird unterstützt von der Stadt Biel, dem Kanton Bern und dem Gemeindeverband Kulturförderung Biel/Bienne-Seeland-Berner Jura. Le Centre d'art de Bienne est soutenu par la ville de Bienne, le canton de Berne et le syndicat Biel/Bienne-Seeland-Jura bernois pour la culture.

DIVIDED SELF

Hiller's search for alternatives to the supposedly singular, coherent selfhood led her to automatic writing, a means of expressing herself while losing control. She extends these questions about what it means to be a person by using the photo booth. This device, invented to automatically produce standardised representations, is the symbol of a bureaucratic system based on objectivity. Susan Hiller uses it to represent herself out of focus, in movement, eyes closed as if asleep, refusing to allow her identity to be determined. These images, which she cuts out, enlarges and covers with passages of paint or script, express the impossibility of exposing the subjective complexity of what a person is.

GRIDS AND VERTIGO

The grid, synonymous with classification and comparison, is a recurring motif in Hiller's work. However, she doesn't use it as a hierarchical system, but as a means of achieving a loss of reference. Both the *Painting Books* (1975) and the *Painting Blocks* (1980) consist of the artist's own paintings which she later cut up and refashioned into books or cubes. What was visual becomes tactile or spatial, and above all becomes a sensitive experience.

ROUGH SEAS

The *Rough Seas* (2009-2015) series is a follow-up to *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists*. The postcards of rough seas are enlarged, altered in colour and form, as a further exploration of the relationship between photography and painterly effects. These alterations are reminiscent of those in the *Midnight* series (1982-1989). They shift the images from recording to expressing extraordinary emotions.

OUTLAW COWGIRL

Paying close attention to the objects of British pop culture, Hiller discovered a model of pitcher in the shape of a cow that spurts milk out of its mouth. This oddity accompanied her astonishment to learn that in England the word cow can be used as a misogynist insult. This is not the case in the United States where the artist grew up. In the United States, Cowboys are, as their name suggests, traditionally men. Women in this profession are thus outlaws. These are just some of the reasons why Susan Hiller chose to associate this jug with a photograph of Jennie Metcalf, a true criminal. The work *Outlaw Cowgirl (4)* (2005), based on the association of ideas, is as fascinating and difficult to decipher as a dream.

THE LAST SILENT MOVIE

Hiller's research, more sensitive than objective, has focused on dead languages. *The Last Silent Movie* (2007) is a film made up of voices speaking in dialects that have disappeared or are about to disappear. This collection does not make any definitive statements, but rather conveys feelings. It is the work of an artist who has asked herself what we understand when faced with signs we cannot decipher. Meanings surpass comprehension.

GALERIES

TACIT ASSUMPTIONS

In the early 1980s, television was the centre around which living rooms were organized. It was here that the stories that used to be told around fireplaces now circulated. *Belshazzar's Feast* (1983-1984) recomposes this environment, in which a monitor broadcasts images of a fire and Hiller's voice singing or whispering testimonies of people who have had visions while watching television. The work refers to the biblical story of King Balthazar who, during a feast, saw a hand appear and write words on a wall. The prophet Daniel explained that he understood the meaning of this message without knowing how to decipher it. This kind of mind-boggling communication certainly has something to do with a form of suggestion typical of the mass media. Susan Hiller also likens it to the experience of hearing unfamiliar languages, or to the child's gaze on tapestry patterns in search of images. This runs through her paintings on wallpaper and her series of photographs *The Secrets of Sunset Beach* (1988), in which the interior of an apartment is the setting for projections of automatic writing. Here, messages appear, infiltrating the domestic environment.

TRANSFORMATIONS

In 1972, Susan Hiller had to move her studio. She burnt the works she didn't want to move and placed their ashes in test tubes. She continued this process with the series *Recent Work* (1972-1973). In 1980, at Matt's Gallery, the public saw her for three weeks unravelling canvases, thread by thread, which she used to compose wall installations. Here too, a precise process transformed an object's status. *Ten Months* (1977-1979) consists of photographs of Susan Hiller's abdomen during her pregnancy. They are organised into ten groups corresponding to the number of lunar months that her gestation period lasted. The images are accompanied by notes, the artist's reflections on creation and procreation, two concepts often kept at a distance. One is reserved for men, the other for women. While preparing *Channels* (2013), an installation comprising hundreds of monitors broadcasting testimonies of near-death experiences, the artist and her gallerist, Robin Klassnik, discovered that one of them was displaying the strange message «Fuck» and «You» when changing channels. Hiller and Klassnik decide to film the behaviour of this device, doomed to disappear. Processual, rational and factual, these works are driven by a desire to understand through physical experience. In this way, they are out of the ordinary, imbued with mysterious knowledge.

WILD TALENTS

A monitor, placed on a chair and decorated with a garland of votive lights, broadcasts extract from documentaries about children with visions. Behind, two montages of film excerpts in which children discover they have psychic powers are projected. One screen shows boys, the other girls. The dimensions and treatment of the monochrome images as much as the amplified sound accentuate the power of these moments of paroxysm. By mixing documents and fiction, facts and emotions, Susan Hiller proposes with *Wild Talents* (1997) an approach to knowledge that blurs the distinction between observation and emotion.