

**Renée Green. *Ongoing Becomings. Retrospective 1989-2009*
Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts Lausanne, 19.09.2009-03.01.2010**

Seated on gaudily patterned cushions, grappling with the headsets, we pause to read the text passing across the screen in colours and with a musical score we can identify, collectively, as '1970's'. Media images and archival footage from the same period, and from across continents and languages, follow each other in a frantic montage of music, text and image. Viewer responses to the associations prompted by this jumble of references are guided by the contemplation of temporality and history in the third-person account of a narrator quickly identified as the artist herself:

Everywhere she goes she encounters echoes of the 1970s. The 1970s are in vogue now. Were they in vogue then? What could that mean? Are the 1990s in vogue now? This is the decade we are in and we are contemporary. It does seem popular to be contemporary, in step with the times.¹

Engaging with Renée Green's installation *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996-1997), which occupies a prominent place in the current retrospective of her work at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts (MBA) Lausanne, we are confronted with a number of conceptual and formal strategies characteristic of the artist's practice, enabling us to focus on some of the qualities that have contributed to making Green an established figure on the international art circuit since the early 1990s. The concern with time as a shifting, constructed entity—a deeply cultural experience structured by the intersections of personal and public narratives—is one such element. Others include the reception of Green's work as an exemplary case for a 1990s return to conceptual practices of the 1970s, which the video *Partially Buried*—a disjunctive chronicle of the artist's search for Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), structured through a personal journey into the semantic space of her own childhood in Cleveland, Ohio—enacts but also addresses and questions. This mode of intervention in her own reception, the ease with which Green interweaves art historical and theoretical investigations in the arts and humanities with her practice as a visual artist, is a further characteristic of her work, and merges seamlessly with teaching and writing as the other cornerstones of her activity.²



Renée Green *Partially Buried in Three Parts*, 1996-1997. Installation, Mixed Media, dimensions variable (detail). Courtesy the artist, Free Agent Media and Elizabeth Dee Gallery New York

The video *Partially Buried* is an integral part of a multimedia installation with the same title, including photographs of the student protests at Kent State in May 1970, novels and newspaper articles of the time, fragments of rock purporting to be traces of the lost woodshed's foundations, as well as 1970s interior furnishings, music and record covers. The associations generated by the work extend further when viewed in combination with the other elements that make up *Partially Buried in Three Parts*. Among these are *Partially Buried Continued* (1997), combining a slideshow of her father's photographs from the Korean War with the artist's investigations into the aftermath of that war and the recent history of Kwangju, as well as *Übertragungen/Transfers* (1997) which explores the linguistic and cultural ruptures faced by immigrants from Germany to the United States. While the three parts explore certain common themes, and employ Smithson as well as Green's family history as linking elements, they each respond to different sites of production (New York, Kwangju, Cologne), thus emphasizing the artist's concern with subjective experience in the exploration of an expanded notion of site specificity extending, as we shall see, across her strikingly consistent artistic practice.

I would argue that the diverse notions of site specificity operative in Green's work, and the shifting installation formats arising from these, constitute the focus of the current exhibition at MBA, organized by curator Nicole Schweizer working closely

with Renée Green herself. Aware of the contexts in which major retrospectives of contemporary artists tend to take place, we might expect a chic architectural celebration of the contemporary—which is exactly what MBA would offer, had the inhabitants of Lausanne not narrowly voted against a project for a new museum building last year. As it is, the exhibition extends over a single floor in a wing of the Palais de Rumine, Lausanne's prime example of 19th century historicism, a rambling building containing a library and collections of zoology, geology, history, and archaeology besides fine art.

We might find in this strange, meandering location a resonance with Green's interests and working practices: the collision of seemingly disparate fields of knowledge extends an invitation to think laterally, to find alternative narratives to those of scientific categorization. However, the collections contained in the building do not function as a site for research, but frame an exhibition labelled as a 'conventional' retrospective. The question almost poses itself here, and is framed bluntly in the opening essay to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition: 'what can a retrospective for Renée Green be?'³ As we have noted, the rejection of linear narrative is central to her practice, and does not fit easily with the chronological approach implied by the tradition of the retrospective exhibition. If we regard the totality of Green's work to date as an 'archive', is it not tempting to find an exhibition format appropriate to the archival operations of her artistic practice? At the Vienna Secession in 1999, Green presented *Between and Including*, the exhibition which has come closest to providing a retrospective of her work to date⁴. For that show, the artist designed a 'maze' of intersecting architectural spaces, allowing the viewer to perceive the work as interrelated rather than discreet entities produced sequentially. The exhibition thus attempted to reinforce the conceptual structures of Green's practice through its spatial arrangement, and took on the character of an artistic gesture in its own right.

This 20-year retrospective takes a very different approach, partly because of the limitations imposed by the space at MBA. Despite its evocative location, the exhibition space essentially consists of a suite of rooms following one on the other, with no real possibility of moving between works without doubling back. This linear

staging must have put considerable pressure on the curator to find an arrangement to do justice to the complex relations between works. Schweizer has adopted a mixture between the chronological logic of a retrospective and a more thematic approach reflected in the titles assigned to the rooms in the viewer's guide. While the first and last rooms of the exhibition set the parameters of the earliest and latest works, the spaces in between often have a clear thematic coherence, while still maintaining something akin to a chronology. The effect is one of subtle shifts between themes and contexts of production.

The first room ('Colors, classifications and viewing arrangements') presents some of the work from 1990, which placed Green at the centre of the discussions around identity politics and the role of postcolonial theory for artistic production at the turn of the decade. Green's activity at this time was focused around her residency at the Studio Museum Harlem and her participation in the Whitney's Independent Study Program, both of which sharpened her sense for the intersections between theory, artistic production and cultural politics. The *Color* series and *Neutral/Natural* (both 1990) consist of large grey panels, specimen jars filled with pigment, labels and texts citing medical reports, diaries and travel journals. Both works now appear as rather pedestrian attempts at an artistic deconstruction of seemingly 'natural' systems of classification and vision, emerging directly from her theoretical interest in Foucauldian 'archaeology'. In the same sense, *Seen* 'is about' the status of the black female body in the western imagination and physically invites the viewer into a play of reflections on the gaze and the subject-object distinction by encouraging her to step onto an exhibition platform (possibly simultaneously a stage, a scaffold and an auction platform for slaves) where her shadow is projected onto a screen behind her. The viewer herself is engaged in an intimate act of looking through a hole in the centre of the floor, from which her gaze is returned in the image of an eye. *Seen* remains a compelling, focused experience, even as we are tempted to dismiss it as a theoretical and artistic relict of its time.

In retrospect, it is not hard to recognize how these types of works addressed a crux in the shift from 1980s practice to that of the 1990s, as a locus of the disjunctures that seemed to occur between different ways of comprehending artworks as social and

political sites. The discussion is (predictably) most starkly framed in the pages of the *October* journal—in whose pages Green featured regularly if ambiguously throughout the 1990s⁵—where there was perhaps a particular interest in staking out the political terrain of 80s postmodernism against the invasion of ‘content’ and ‘subjectivity’. For Rosalind Krauss, the problem was to become centered on the question of the relationship between form and content. Commenting on the 1993 Whitney Biennial (in which Green’s work *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992) featured prominently) she criticizes the trend towards a politics based on ‘identity’ in terms of an instrumentalization of artistic form: ‘form is one of convenience or accommodation—that this or that form will allow a particular idea to be communicated’.⁶ With regard to Green, the interspersion of text with photographs and objects, and the attempt to find a formal system to support these associative links (between media and concepts) is striking in this early work and might draw our attention to the way this complex thinking through the relationship between ‘form’ and ‘content’ inflects Green’s practice as a whole.

The palpable anxiety apparent in the pages of *October* in the early 1990s seems to be about the inflection of conceptual practises with a ‘return’ of the subject as the basis for forms of production and critique. As we move into the second room of the exhibition (‘The circulation of ideas and forms: images and music’) we encounter an instance of such critical intervention based on the personal experience of the artist-subject. *Idyll Pursuit* (1991) was one of Greens first projects to emerge directly from a residency outside the United States, and addressed the issues surrounding her stay as a ‘visiting’ artist in Venezuela by producing an installation bringing together colonial accounts and images exploring a utopian ‘exotic’ in South America, inserting her own image (taken during her stay) among these. This may be read as an early reflection on the practises of cultural exchange emerging in the 1990s and the ways in which such a practice appears to both counter and continue the colonial narrative; her condition as researcher and traveller within a particular context enabling rather than negating the validity of her conceptual interventions. The centrality of the artist as travelling, experiencing subject with a history and a situated relationship to the place she is working from has since become a commonplace of contemporary artistic vocabulary. From an art historical perspective, it is worthwhile considering it here in

the context of a retrospective linking it to the debates around identity, subjectivity and postcolonial theory that marked the New York art world in the early parts of the previous decade.

It is also an example of Green's foundational involvement in that expanded notion of site specificity which Miwon Kwon and James Meyer were to be instrumental in theorizing.⁷ Green's engagement of Smithson's displacement of the site as 'non-site',⁸ the possibility of reconfiguring the relation between the place of research and the place of exhibition, are key to understanding her artistic process and become more fully articulated in later works. The notion of 'site specificity' rapidly expands in Green's work to include other types of systems and media, and it does so in the social spaces offered by travel and commerce, accessed via the artist's own experience of living and working in other places (most notably Cologne, Vienna and Lisbon). Here, the concern with culture as 'contact zone', a term the artist herself adopted to describe her interest in the shifting, unstable, transformative nature of different forms of exchange,⁹ emerges in the shape of researching her own cultural encounters and reference points. Music is the primary catalyst for her investigation of these issues. Here *Wavelinks* (2002), an exploration of progressive electronic music during the 1990s, approaches these concerns using one of Green's favored tropes, the video interview, divided into 7 full-length films investigating different aspects according to Green's personal interests and associations (e.g. *The Aural and the Visual, Activism & Sound*). This work is in various ways about sites—social networks for example, or the role material locations (laptops, performance spaces) play in the seemingly dematerialized practice of electronic music—and seems to demonstrate Nina Möntmann's thesis about the transformation of site specificity into a concern with 'social space'.¹⁰

The exhibition is structured noticeably around a number of theoretical concepts which Green herself has made operative for the reception of her work, including 'flows', 'transfers', 'connections' and 'contact zones' as ways to describe cultural activity and the relations between sites. This is notable with regard to the way her engagement with postcolonial critique is framed. Apart from the early works described above, the third room of the exhibition, entitled 'Staging the colonial past', contains her best

known work in this category, *Commemorative Toile* (1992), which she produced in response to the colonial history of fabric production in Nantes. On the opposite wall the implication of the European 19th century bourgeois interior in the colonial activity of travelling and collecting is traced in *Certain Miscellanies* (1995). Arranged between *Wavelinks* and *Partially Buried*, the two works demonstrate comparable concerns with the historical shape of cultural production (music, the interior), its connection to travel and (often deeply exploitative) forms of exchange.



Renée Green *Wavelinks* (2002-2004). Installation, 7 octagonal units, videos and sound, dimensions variable. Collection Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore

The dominant impression of the second room in this installation, however, rests with its formal and functional use of this large, central space. First, there is the high visual impact of the colourful banners with words and phrases stitched on fabric that are a trademark medium of Green's recent work, including *United Space of Conditioned Becoming* and *Climate paradoxes* (both 2007), suspended from ceiling and walls. Secondly, the room is divided by means of the pavilion-like structures that act as viewing cubicles for the 7 videos of *Wavelinks*, arranged circularly in the centre of the room, and the coloured benches of *Standardized Octagonal Units for Imagined and Existing Systems (Imagined Places A-Z)* (2002), originally designed for Documenta 11, scattered around these. Such heavily mediated viewing situations—platforms, boxes, benches, pavilions, cushions, plastic room dividers—structure our passage through the entire exhibition, and are supplemented by the aural stimulation provided

by distinct musical scores for each room. The sheer density of the material we are confronted with, the protagonists of narratives, the interviewees, the theoretical references and visual and acoustic correspondences, can be overwhelming and bring two kinds of pressures to bear on the viewer: that of being given the freedom to explore, and the constraints placed on time and attention. What are we meant to do with all this information? Is it possible to relate to the excess of images and associations by simply dipping in and out of individual works? Green herself, describing viewers as 'perceivers' on account of their physical and aural involvement, strives for a parallel between her own experience while researching her material and the viewers experience of it, a moment of 'imagining beyond one's capabilities'.¹¹ Her approach seems to differ from that of much contemporary work containing implicit demands of the viewer (how long will you stay? How much attention will you give me? What will you miss?) in the way it shapes and actively addresses these moments of decision making through the inclusion of heavily mediated spaces that function to counter the overwhelming impact of the material we are confronted with. Here the retrospective arrangement allows us to see clear continuities with the early works, which display a similar interest in the forms of presentation as well as the categorization of knowledge.

This role of the 'user interface' mediating access to the 'archive' is perhaps most evident in an aspect of her work barely touched on in this 'retrospective': the use she has consistently made of 'new media' and cultural technology as a site outside the gallery space—for example, her web-based project for *Import/Export Funk Office* (1994),¹² itself a development of an initial experiment with an interactive CD-ROM, or the ongoing project *Code: Survey*.¹³ On the other hand, the exhibition prominently engages with Free Agent Media (FAM), an enterprise for various time-based projects and events. Instigated by Green in 1994, it archives and publishes the artist's own work as well as functioning as a distribution company for others. We might include this 'dream company . . . operating in the interstices of late capitalism',¹⁴ among the projects demonstrating her concern with the contexts of cultural production and distribution, its possible sites and technologies. FAM is semi-fictionalized, part metaphor, part active agent, part irony, part serious intent—and thus encapsulates

much of Green's differentiated approach and her amused, critical glances at the complexities of her own practice.

In the final rooms, this retrospective introduces another thread to its argument, centering on the theme of the fictional narrative and authorial voice. *Secret* (1993) has become one of Green's best-known works, and is often cited as an example of another emergent artistic genre of the 1990s, that of 'auto-ethnography'. Documenting her stay in an apartment at Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation in Firminy, she produced videos, sound recordings, and photographs narrating her experience and research from the critical distance of a third-person perspective, thus containing a moment of fictionalization as she engages with the implications of her position as artist working on a specific site, confronting its history and its current inhabitants.¹⁵ Although the work falls chronologically at an early point in Green's career, here it is placed in a trajectory leading to Green's most recent work *Endless Dreams and Water Between* (2009), which seems to enact a shift from the artist as subject and protagonist within her own work to an increased interest in the role of the imagination in the construction of narrative.

Green has explored the notion of the 'imaginary' place in a number of works, from the fantasy place names whispered evocatively to the listener in *Elsewhere* (2002) to the impossibilities of returning to a place that is present only in memory and documentation in *Partially Buried* (1997). Here, however, she seems to enact a turn toward the fictional and literary, reflected in her engagement with the writings of Laura Riding and George Sand and a narrative centering on the epistolary exchange between four imaginary women, who also resemble the artist herself. This story is told in the shape of maps and drawings, often overlaid with text, the trademark banners, and a video combining slow, mesmerizing film footage of Majorca, Manhattan and San Francisco Bay with voiceovers of the four characters. Two further videos, 'Excess' and 'Stills' reflect on the artist's research process in a montage of text and image, and contribute a critical distance to the hypnotizing effect of the tales of travel, return and displacement enacted in the other parts of the installation.



Renée Green *Endless Dreams and Water Between* (2009). Installation, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Free Agent Media and National Maritime Museum Greenwich

The work oscillates between the investigative and the poetic, and the artist herself occupies multiple positions, that of the researcher/journalist and explorer/reader. Placing it in a genealogy with earlier works that take the artist's own experience of working and living between places as the starting point for research allows us to trace gradual shifts in her practice—and thus the juxtaposition of *Secret* and *Endless Dreams and Water Between* is perhaps one of the most effective 'retrospective' moments in this exhibition, inviting us to reflect on both breaks and continuities in Green's practice over the past two decades. An interesting avenue to explore here, for example, would be her use of handwriting and spoken language in the exploration of the relationship between fiction and research.

While the act of writing is central to her recent work, Renée Green's practice as a producer of texts, as participant in theoretical debates and commentator on her own work, does not feature prominently in either the exhibition or the accompanying catalogue. However, the catalogue does reflect the extent to which Renée Green's adept handling of theory has influenced her critical reception. A striking example of this circular logic is appears early on, as contributor Elvan Zabunyan considers the question we began with, 'what can a retrospective of Renée Green be?' His answer is ultimately unsatisfactory:

Finding the thread that can link the works made between 1989 and 2009 means thinking of the history of this practice as a visual artist and writer using the methodology she applies to her own research. Genealogy, as for Renée Green, will be one of the leads we follow in our critical approach¹⁶

Such continuity between interpretative and curatorial gestures and the artist's theoretical and procedural approach, a mirroring of the activity of production in the forms of reception, is characteristic for much writing on Green, including some of the contributions to the catalogue. It might be worth contemplating why a distancing gap between artistic practice and its reflection in critical writing seems to elude the discourse around Green's practice, particularly as a 'retrospective' might mark a point of increased art historical engagement with her work. We might ask ourselves why the artist's own vocabulary seems so effective, and whether it leaves us with gaps in our possible approaches. One such gap might be the recurrent question of how to frame an 'aesthetic' consideration of her work, an issue which Juliane Rebentisch raises compellingly in conversation with the artist,¹⁷ while Gloria Sutton's essay on the 'formal operations' of Green's practice lacks a clear definition of its terms and never gets to the crux of what a 'formal' approach might mean in this context. Nora Alter's investigation of the role of sound—including music and voice—in Green's productions, however, opens up an interesting field of investigation, although it is unsatisfactorily short and leaves the reader with an irritating sense of incompleteness.

The catalogue above all has two functions: firstly, it expands on a small and (to my mind) tightly argued exhibition to provide a veritable 'archive' of Green's work that seems to aim at a comprehensiveness which the exhibition lacks. Sticking to the theme of the retrospective, it chronologically presents—in a series of high quality colour plates—a much vaster array of works than are assembled in the exhibition, which together with the excellent bibliography (with listings from English, French and German sources) and index of works makes it secondly into an indispensable research tool for anyone interested in delving further into Renée Green's complex production. It appears that the site of the exhibition has been expanded to include the

non-site of the catalogue, the shape of this retrospective finally taking on some of the characteristics of Green's work, after all.

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Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings. Retrospective 1989-2009. Edited by Nicole Schweizer, with contributions by Elvan Zabunyan, Kobena Mercer, Juliane Rebentisch, Renée Green, Catherine Quéloz, Gloria Sutton, Nora Alter and Diedrich Diederichsen. (Zürich: jrp ringier), English/French, 159pp. softcover, col., CHF 50.

¹ From Renée Green, 'Partially Buried Version A: Reading Script', in *October* 80, Spring 1997: 40.

² Green was Professor at the Akademie für Bildende Künste in Vienna from 1997-2002, Distinguished Artist Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. 2003-2005, and is currently Professor and Dean of Graduate Studies at the San Francisco Art Institute.

³ Elvan Zabunyan 'We Are Here', in *Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2009): 7

⁴ Feb 10th to April 11th 1999, Secession Wien. A publication conceived as an artist-book was subsequently published based on the exhibition, see *Renée Green. Between and Including*, Giuliana Bruno, Michael Eng, Renée Green, Lynne Tillman, Joe Wood (Köln: DuMont 2001).

⁵ The debate around Green's work is most visible in Hal Foster's essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer', originally published in *October* (see *The Return of the Real* [Cambridge: MIT Press 1996]: 171-203) and the artist's response to this, see Renée Green 'Der Künstler als Ethnograf?', in *Texte zur Kunst* 1997, c.7 no.27: 152-161.

⁶ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh 'The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial', in *October* 66, Fall 1993: 7. She is referring to Green, but also significantly to Fred Wilson.

⁷ Miwon Kwon 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity' [1997], in Erika Suderburg (ed.) *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 38-63; James Meyer 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity', in Suderburg (ed.) *Space, Site, Intervention*: 23-37.

⁸ The term displacement to describe Smithson's notion (the artist defines it in terms of a 'dialectic') is Stephen Melville's; see Stephen Melville 'Robert Smithson, A Literalist of the Imagination', in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context* (Amsterdam: G and B Arts, 1996).

⁹ Renée Green (ed.) *Negotiations in the Contact Zone* (Lisbon: Assirio & Alvim, 2003 [Symposium at the Drawing Centre New York, 1994]), term adapted from Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰ Nina Möntmann *Kunst als Sozialer Raum. Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Renée Green* (Köln: Verlag Buchhandlung Walther König, 2002).

¹¹ 'From one Island to Another: Conversation between Juliane Rebentisch and Renée Green', in *Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings*: 77.

¹² http://www.uni-lueneburg.de/import_export/blacklabeled/intro.html

¹³ http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist07/code_survey/intro.htm

¹⁴ Green 'Free Agent Media'—Leaflet, included in the exhibition, notes taken in the exhibition.

¹⁵ Part of the collective Project Unité, curated by Yves Aupetitallot, 1992-1993. For an incisive discussion of Green's auto-ethnographic strategies see Anke Kempkes 'Der Ärger mit dem Narzissmus von Künstlerinnen. Renée Greens "She" auf Exkursion', in *Texte zur Kunst*, vol.7, no. 28 1997: 94-105.

¹⁶ Elvan Zabunyan 'We Are Here', in *Renée Green. Ongoing Becomings*: 7.

¹⁷ Rebentisch is one of a younger generation of German writers on art to have taken up the issue of the viewer as political and social subject in the 'aesthetic' situation produced by installation art. Working from and through the Frankfurt school tradition, her writing provides an interesting pendant to Claire Bishop's confrontation of similar issues during the past decade. See her compelling if densely

written PhD dissertation published as Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003).