

Susan Hiller

English



WICHITA
(dormant)

I am the only person left who speaks Wichita.
I'll be gone and they can still hear my voice.

Lost and Found

Susan Hiller is an influential pioneer of video art and multimedia installation whose distinguished career spans more than 40 years of production. Hiller is known for works that combine the archival tendencies of Conceptual art with an emphasis on psychologically charged subjects, ranging from war memorials to paranormal phenomena. The following interview accompanies the exhibition of Hiller's latest work, *Lost and Found*, commissioned by Pérez Art Museum Miami.

René Morales, PAMM Curator: Describe *Lost and Found* in your own words.

Susan Hiller: *Lost and Found* is a 30-minute video in which people speak their own languages – some of these languages are now extinct, the rest are endangered – telling stories, describing where they live, singing, reading the weather report, talking about a tsunami or discussing car problems or their school days.

RM: The subject of endangered languages is so important, and you approach it in such a powerful way. The loss of any language is undeniably a loss for all of humanity, but what makes this work so moving is that it personalizes the issue. Although we never see the speakers in *Lost and Found*, we are able to get a clear sense of their individual personalities. In some cases, we can apprehend how interlinked their ancestral language is with their own sense of identity; how it is wedded to a sense of belonging to long, proud lineages of predecessors; and how inseparable it is from their hopes for the future of their culture or tribe or nation. What do you think is at stake, for individuals and for all of us, whenever a language is in danger of being extinguished?

SH: As members of the human race, what we collectively lose when a language dies is a unique window on reality, since each language structures the world differently. We all live inside the picture our native language paints for us – the limitations as well as the insights our language provides – since we are born into a language and world view that preexists our individual lives. Our own culture's definition of reality is only one of many possibilities presented by the extraordinary variety of world views in different languages. This is the biggest loss when a language becomes extinct.

In a more specific sense, of course, we lose local knowledge about plants and animals, practical and technical knowledge, poetry, medical information, and much else.

RM: You've mentioned that you sought to achieve "a balance between the poetics of loss and the poetics of hope" with this work. Could you expand on that?

SH: *Lost and Found* begins with the voices of people who once spoke languages that are now extinct and ends with the optimistic voices of people who speak revitalized or revived languages.

RM: Describe the working method you employed in creating *Lost and Found*. What kinds of sources did you draw on? Were there certain predetermined themes guiding your choices, or was it a more intuitive process of searching for passages that moved you or caught your interest?

SH: I can spend days and days looking, reading, and listening before I start any new work. I go down a lot of fascinating paths that I have to disregard as what I'm actually after becomes clearer. Eventually a focus emerges that I recognize as what I've been looking for. For *Lost and Found* I wandered around in a number of places for several months, including academic archives, old documentary films, online language lessons, UNESCO and other databases, and of course, the Internet. I decided to retain the textures of these different resources in the final work because they all contribute to contemporary discussions around language extinction and preservation. The materials actually proposed their own structure, almost a narrative about language loss and language revival with many nuanced aspects and a range of modes. I worked with this structure according to my own idea about "truth to materials."

RM: Certain speakers in *Lost and Found* convey an almost palpable sense of melancholy over the imminent or potential loss of their languages. And yet, the work is clearly not just a form of lamentation or elegy. Some of the speakers share mundane anecdotes, or recite strings of words (the names of colors, numbers, common objects, etc.), which I suppose are meant to serve as samplings of their languages for the sake of



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study or preservation. Could you expand on this aspect of the work – the variations in its emotional texture?

SH: Obviously an artwork is very different from an academic study. Nuance, tone, texture, and rhythm provide what I would call “deep information,” which is a kind of pleasure. Juxtapositions are very important in this work, as are contrasts, parallel forms, shades of meaning, and all the things that make art different from academic use of the same or similar materials. I think the choreography of elements in *Lost and Found* provides information that isn’t just on the surface. In a way, I would like the voices in *Lost and Found* to affect audiences a bit like music does.

RM: The green line that dances across the screen throughout the film renders visible something invisible – the reverberations of sound waves passing through each speaker’s body. What other kinds of invisible or intangible dynamics does it give form to?

SH: The green oscilloscope graphic represents the vocal patterns and frequencies of each speaker in *Lost and Found*. It’s a kind of continuous drawing that links all of the utterances together although they originate in different places and times. Speech, as you said, passes through each speaker’s body and also through ours, as we are literally touched by these vibrations. I had a medical analogy in mind when I decided to use the oscilloscopic reference, which could be understood as a lifeline.

RM: Would you agree that there is a political undercurrent to *Lost and Found*, relating to the histories of colonialism and the processes of modernization that have resulted in or contributed to the precarious state in which so many languages and cultures have found themselves? To what extent was this undercurrent a conscious part of your motivations and interests in the realization of the work?

SH: I started this work with endangered languages as a reaction against several things, almost a contestation. Although there is a lot of mournful talk about how tragic it is that languages are “disappearing,” somehow this “just happens” without any explanation of why. *Lost and Found* looks for a social consciousness in its audience, searching for an empathetic response to the voices of people speaking extinct or endangered languages. The speakers in *Lost and Found* are haunted by their pasts, but we prefer to ignore the histories of how their languages came to “disappear” or become “endangered.” I want this work to strategically oppose our indifference to the fates of these languages and the fates of the people who speak, or spoke, them.

RM: What effects are recordings such as these capable of producing when they are understood as the contents of an artwork as opposed to materials pertaining to an ethnographic archive?

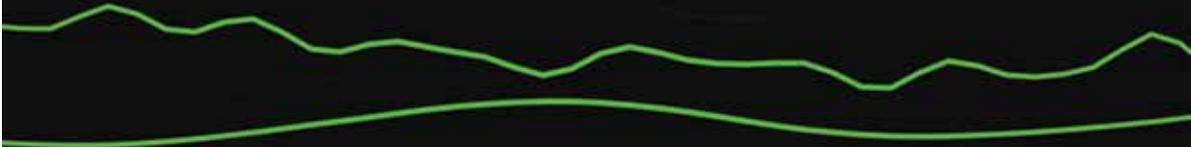
SH: Academic language archives are usually closed to the public, and in any case, are not designed to engage empathetically with anyone, since their purpose is to record linguistic material for future analysis. I believe that art practice is as capable of producing knowledge as any scientific discourse, but knowledge of a different kind entirely. Art transforms its materials at the same time that it approaches its audiences personally. This is completely different from any academic or scholarly use of similar materials. You are probably already aware of my strong resistance to the “objective” distancing of some academic methods, which concentrate on languages separate from the people who speak them. *Lost and Found* is a restless, incomplete archive, made for audiences to share my pleasure in the delightful sounds humans make when they talk, while at the same time becoming aware of what is at stake here. I hope the work is accessible enough to propose an ethics of memory.

**LIVONIAN
(dormant)**



Some do not even know that their
grandparents spoke Livonian.

**BERBER / TAMAZIGHT
(severely endangered)**



Wait! Let me tell you the whole story.

LENAPE / DELAWARE
(dormant)



They said, "We will really treat you well for
as long as the river flows and the sun rises."

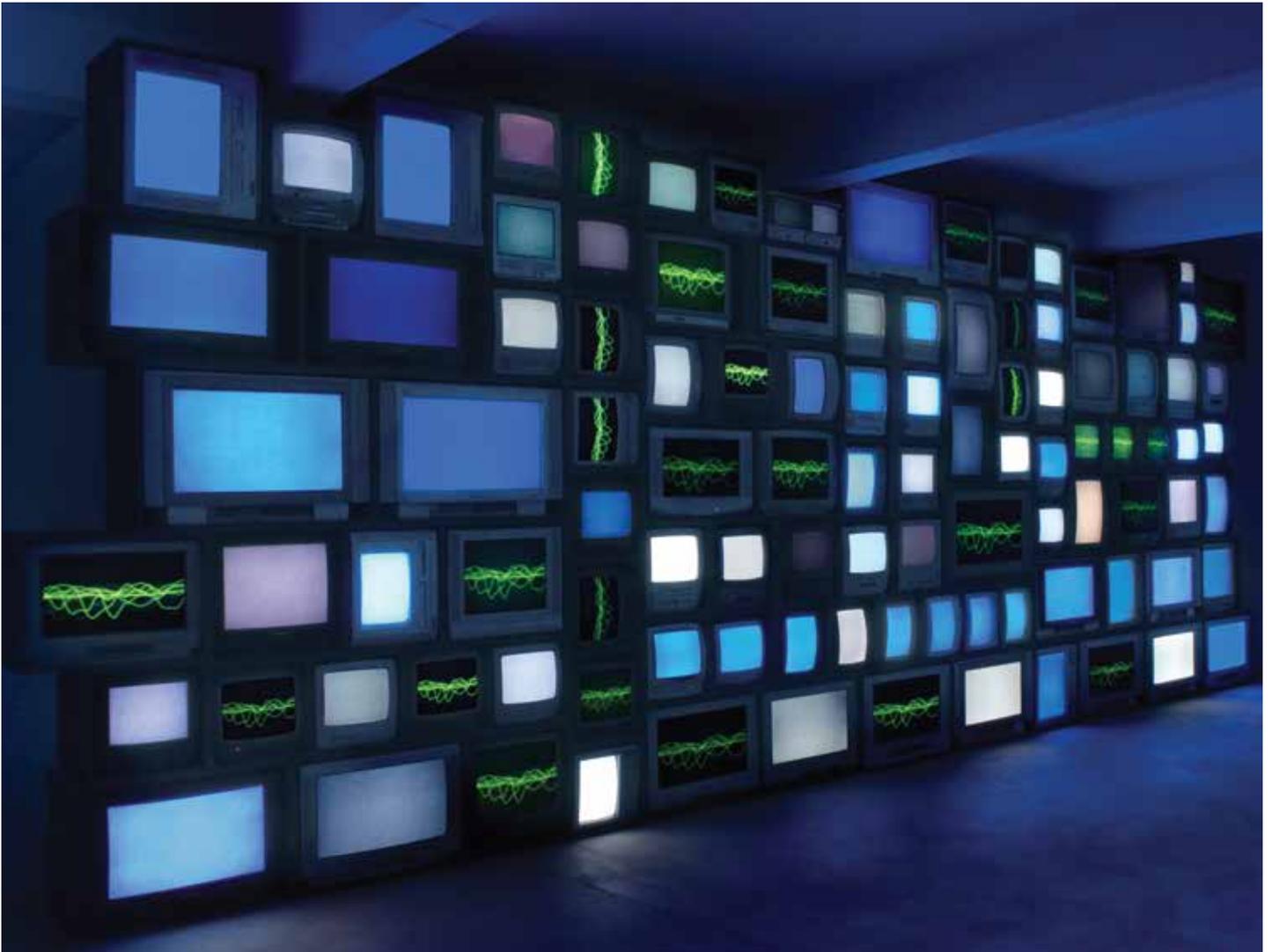
BRETON
(severely endangered)



Green.



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RM: Let's pan out a bit to the question of archives in general, a topic that has been very close to the core of your work almost from its beginning. The point of departure for your work is often a collection of objects – bottled samples of holy water from diverse sites related to diverse belief systems, "Rough Sea" postcards depicting waves crashing ashore, fragments of Pueblo pottery, etc. What is it that interests you about the act of accumulation? What do your collections share in common?

SH: In the early 1970s, I decided to work with seemingly unimportant materials I call "cultural artifacts"; this was a radical intervention into conceptualism and not well understood at the time, although now so many artists work this way that it doesn't need further explanation. Collecting and presenting a number of instances is part of my style. All my works involve the audience as witness to the gaps and contradictions in our collective cultural life.

Human voices are the starting points for a number of my works such as *Monument* (1980/81), *Witness* (2000), *The Last Silent Movie* (2007), and *Channels* (2013). I'm interested in the unacknowledged, uncanny ghostliness of recorded sound that doesn't distinguish between the voices of people long dead and those of the living. In *Lost and Found*, voices of dead people and voices of living people present themselves as technological ghosts I've temporarily organized in a heterogeneous collection – criticizing, commemorating, mourning, celebrating, mocking, and narrating different points of view.

RM: Much of your work involves a pronounced tension between highly systematic, analytical modes of presentation and highly charged materials – objects as well as nonobjects (verbal testimonials, songs, and gestures) that radiate emotive power. As others have observed, there is often a paradoxical relation between objectivity and subjectivity, rationality and irrationality. Are you more interested in subjecting the irrational to rational scrutiny, or in questioning the validity of objective approaches?

SH: I once said that objectivity is a fantasy our own culture is heavily invested in. I like to look closely – and to invite other people to look closely – at quite ordinary things that paradoxically present divergent meanings, things, and ideas whose contradictions are ignored, misunderstood, neglected, or even ridiculed. I don't actually go in for schematic presentations, certainly not in the work we are discussing, which is choreographed organically and rhythmically, but thanks to my Minimalist heritage, I do gravitate toward simple formats that I feel are "democratic" groupings of materials. I think through foregrounding the contradictions you mention, my works open up areas of instability, where fixed meanings are dissolved, and where the audience is directly implicated as agent in the emergence of fresh meanings that may surface through the work.

RM: I'd like to circle back now to *Lost and Found*, and to point out that the work is making its debut in a city that happens to be extremely polylingual, where on a nearly daily basis one overhears not only Spanish (in practically every one of its various accents and inflections), but also Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and even, every once in a while, various Caribbean and South American patois languages and dialects like Papiamentu (from Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire). Miami is a city of immigrants, where so many people share in common the hopes and pressures involved in holding on to one's language of origin – in making sure that one's children maintain their linguistic ties to their heritage. For many, this dynamic comprises a central, and at times, fraught aspect of the immigrant experience. What kinds of effects do you hope *Lost and Found* will generate amid this particular context, loaded as it is in this sense?

SH: I would like to imagine that experiencing *Lost and Found* would encourage empathy and respect for the speakers of endangered languages and their hopes for a more positive future.

Susan Hiller
October 13, 2016 – June 4, 2017

Susan Hiller
b. 1940, Tallahassee; lives in London

Lost and Found, 2016
Video, sound
Running time 30 minutes

Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

Susan Hiller: Lost and Found is organized by Pérez Art Museum Miami Curator René Morales and presented by Vhernier.

VHERNIER
MILANO

Biography

Susan Hiller was born in 1940 and lived in and around Cleveland, Ohio, before her family moved to South Florida in 1952. She attended Ponce de Leon Junior High School and Coral Gables High School. In 1961 she received a BA from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and then spent a year in New York studying photography at The Cooper Union and linguistics at Hunter College before receiving a National Science Foundation Fellowship to study for a PhD. in Anthropology at Tulane University in New Orleans. In 1965 she moved to London, where she is still based. Major retrospectives of Hiller's work have been organized by the

Institute for Contemporary Art, London, and Tate Britain, London. Other solo exhibitions have been presented at venues including The Jewish Museum, New York; Generali Foundation, Vienna; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus; Museo Serralves, Porto; Freud Museum, London; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; and Serpentine Gallery, London, among others. Hiller is a recipient of prestigious awards including the Guggenheim Fellowship in Visual Art Practice, the Gulbenkian Foundation Visual Arts Award, and the Berlin DAAD Fellowship. Her work is included in numerous major public collections.

Images

Cover, 3–6 *Lost and Found*, 2016. Video, sound. Running time 30 minutes. Commissioned by Pérez Art Museum Miami

2 *Psi Girls*, 1999. Five-channel video projection, sound. Running time 15 minutes

7 *Witness*, 2000. 350 speakers, 10 media players, amplifiers, lights. Dimensions variable

8 *Channels*, 2014. Multi-channel video installation, 106 television sets, 16 media players. Commissioned by Matt's Gallery, London

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