

(WISHING) WELL

A Work commissioned by Hull Time-Based Arts
1991

Description

In the middle of a darkened room stands a stone-built well. It is dimly lit from below. Two steps encircle the base of the structure enabling visitors to climb up and look down into it. The muffled sound of a child's voice emanates from the depths of the well interspersed with the occasional dripping of water. As the viewer looks over the edge s/he might expect a reflection of her own image, but the face of a child stares back at her. The impression of the child as reflection quickly gives way to the sense that the boy is under the water, trapped but alive at the bottom of the well. At intervals the child speaks out of lip-sync but it's voice is distorted by the water. It's image is periodically broken up by falling droplets disturbing the surface of the water. There is a sense of urgency in the child's voice, but it's face remains calm.

Concept

The work operates as a series of illusions- the stone may not be real, the child's voice is a recording, it's face is an electronic image and the water it gazes through plays temporarily on the surface of the video screen. Only the distance between us and the child is real. It is extended by the physical and temporal distance that the video recording imposes. The child was somewhere else at the time the recording was made, it belongs to the past, we were not there to answer it's calls. We cannot reach it now.

Context

This installation exists in the context of my own previous works and makes a link with the newly-completed exhibition of childhood in the nearby old school building. Where the museum maps out the social context of individual childhoods the installation aims at a more general sense of the child and the child within the adult as it attempts to communicate. In "Myth" (1983) the child was struggling to differentiate between itself and the mother's lactating breast. Later in "First House" (1986) the woman and child were held/trapped by a doorless house and engaged in some playful attempts at separation. Now in "(Wishing) Well" the child and the woman are no longer seen as separate. The mother who gazes down into her child's face sees herself mirrored there. It is that old child that she must learn to nurture, listen to, and understand, so that her own child may grow unharmed by the spectre of the child she once was.

Ramifications

As I sit and invent "meanings" for this piece, I am aware of reluctantly imposing closures where my intention was to open up possibilities. Perhaps the answer is to spill out a proliferation of readings, or set something in motion, so that others may re-interpret the work for themselves. The viewer could be young or old, see the child as self or other. A childless adult may recognise themselves as a child. A parent may also identify the image with their own child and their protective mechanisms will be activated..."my God the child has fallen down a well, just like that kid in America." Older people may remember untold childhood hardships. A sufferer from claustrophobia may see themselves cast down some medieval oubliette. A therapist will recognise the child's difficulties with speech- it's inability to make itself heard- it's isolation and profound loneliness. A garden enthusiast will think what an odd use of a nice well.

Specifications

The installation requires:

One U-matic player and a 27" monitor
Four ground-level lighting sources
Labour for the construction of the well.

Catherine Elwes
Oct. 1990.