

DIFFICULT JOYS

Jools Gilson-Ellis
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Let me write this to you.

I can't sleep anymore. This is difficult, and my joys run before me. Write to me here. Say it again simply. Write it down so I won't forget it. What is it? Happy Birthday Julie. You will understand again and again, but not in the water. It rains. It's. It's. I choke and sneeze in the water, and I can see little. Sometimes there are faces at the glass. Writing. It's peaceful down there. Quiet. And I cannot see myself being looked at. And I cannot write. What you can see, has everything to do with what you can say.

Let me describe this to you.

The performer is situated in a glass tank 4 ft long, 2 ft wide, and 2 ft 6' high, filled with water. The tank is placed at the end of two lengths of black dance floor which draws members of the audience to the performance site. Downstage of the tank, are three sets of frozen sculptural objects, placed at intervals before the tank. The first is a birthday card frozen within a block of ice, written in a scrawled hand. The second is a suspended oblong block of ice, which contains several dozen small bendy clowns, placed in various physical (dancerly) positions. This block melted onto a page of typewritten text, which was placed on the ground beneath it. The last ice block was a page of frozen handwritten text. Ice melted as the performance progressed. The performance lasted one hour, and audience members were encouraged to stay for as long, or as little as they wished, or to make several visits. The performer worked repeatedly underwater, and came up for air when she needed it. Her breathing was amplified. The performance consisted of a combination of task-based movement and choreographed sequences in the water. The various tasks were involved with writing under water, both on the performer's own body, and on submerged paper. Choreographic sequences combined gestural signing sequences with movement derived from the manipulation of the task work. Audience members were encouraged to view the piece from close as well as distant perspectives.

Proper Analysis

Difficult Joys is a dance/installation, which is part of an on-going series of performance work, in relation to my research work into *Women Performance Writers*. This research work is part of a written and performed doctoral thesis in the areas of *Performance* and *Gender Studies*. I am using the term *Women Performance Writers* to refer to women who produce written texts as an integral part of their performance practice, and I am including myself amongst these women. The work attempts to locate writing as a bodily practise within an intellectual practise, and to explore how the physical dynamics of writing/the written text, permeate in the visual body, in performance space as well as in academic space. At this conference I performed *Difficult Joys* on the first

evening of the conference, and gave a conference paper the following day. My interest in writing in performance, blurs here in these distinctions. I do not see the giving of a paper and the performance of *Difficult Joys* as different practices. The last page of my conference paper was part of the installation *Difficult Joys*; was placed on the ground beneath the iced clowns. The two women I focus on in the conference paper, I gave at *Border Tensions*, and included here in these proceedings; Rose English and Laurie Anderson, both verbalise their written texts. In *Difficult Joys*, there is no speaking of the texts placed in the space. Indeed all that is heard is the sound of breathing, and spluttering in the water. There is a play between the framing of this female body and the framing of the page in the space. The rectangular shape of the tank and of the texts, refer to each other, confuse and repeat each other. The water in the tank is reconvened as ice around texts and objects. I want to suggest in this work that acts of looking and reading/writing text are intimately connected.

Secrets

7a) The birthday card used in this piece was written by my grandmother who died a week after it was written.

b) moving swiftly and joyfully on.

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Difficult Joys: Programme Details

Friday 21 April, 1995, at 5:30 p.m.
PATS Music Studio, University of Surrey

Created and performed by Jools Gilson-Ellis
Technical Director: Neil Smith
Tank made by: Aqua Stands, Whitchurch

Biography

Jools Gilson-Ellis won the 1988 Graduate Scholarship to the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she studied theatre and dance with Mel Wong, Bob Een, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. A lecturer, researcher, and performer, Gilson-Ellis is currently researching women writing *in relation to* performance. Special Lecturer in Drama at the University of Hull from 1990 to 1992, she is currently Lecturer in Theatre at Dartington College of Arts.

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