



Sheilah Wilson's Performance
The Visible Inside the Invisible
by Stephen Horne

The Seaview Racetrack off Cape John Road in Nova Scotia once existed as a popular local attraction but is now marked only in local folklore, stories and memory. In our time, its existence is ghostly, chimerical—a mirage that Sheilah Wilson has encountered and then appropriated for her performance *The Visible Inside the Invisible*. This event took place as a summoning or “drawing up” from the depths of the past. The performance took place as a search for the horseracing track along rural Nova Scotia’s Northumberland Shore. In the language of the region’s former Acadian population, the track would have been a hippodrome, a name with a long history connecting back to its source in the ancient Greek concept of “festival.”

Searching for something lost can be arduous or amusing, frustrating or transformative. Searching may be play or it may be in the form of a game. Uncertainty is a given in the case of searching. To some extent, one has to be ignorant of the object sought—or there would be no need for the search. But, at the same time, one must have enough knowledge to recognize the object when it is found. The process is circular, and in this case, playful. In play, everyday seriousness is suspended. Wilson has shifted the terms from commonplace activity to speculative deception with all the attractions of a festival, or what artist Pierre Huyghe calls “freed time.” She has invited us onto a terrain of undecidability. As Dutch historian Johan Huizinga noted, it is the indecisiveness of the playing consciousness that makes it impossible to decide between belief and non-belief: “In our concept of play the difference between belief and pretence is dissolved.”¹ Is this search serious in its own right or is it a pretext with which to open up a space of imagination and fiction? Again, it’s contingent and undecidable.

Wilson’s search began with a story told by a friend and journeys into the space of landscape and psyche, materials on the way to becoming a performance. The search eventually took shape as an event where the lost object was a site not quite historic but rather anamnestic: a subject held in memory and story. In other words, the object was not entirely physical nor substantial, evoking nostalgia for a remembered place in another time. I might add that many of Wilson’s other works stage a mock spiritualism’s dimensions of dream, memory and imagination with the aim of destabilizing oppositions between the psychic and the substantial, the rational and the unconscious. On this basis, her work is affiliated with artists such as David Askevold and Susan Hiller, both well known for their journeys into the soul and its dreamed landscapes.

Wilson's search for a place lost in the past is the stuff of imagination and play that exists before that of science and common sense. Searching for a place lost in the past is also a compression of popular notions about the nature of remembering. For example, in thinking that memories are "in our heads," one's head and one's memory are storage places.

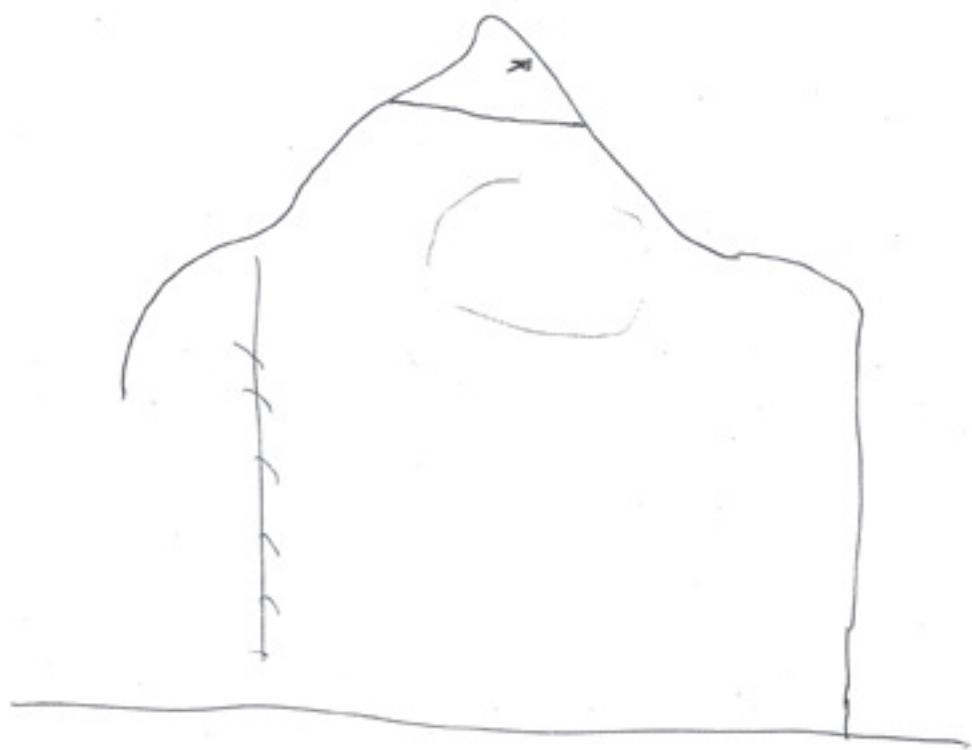
Wilson's performance is a practice with which she draws out the past from enduring memories through stories and descriptions, through local legend and gossip. She also literalized the process by re-drawing the race-track with lime, leaving a visible white trace, which she then photographed from the air.

Wilson's performance had several dimensions. In good, quasi-anthropological style she interviewed local inhabitants, finding only one person who had actually seen the long-vanished racetrack. In a typical account, the track was reported to be "out there. You know, everyone said it was. But I never did see it." Versions of the phrase "...so I've been told" recur, as does "...that is where it was." The performance was extended into print with a flier and audio installed at the local Quik Mart, and at Lee Tik's gas station. The flier presents an aerial photograph of the racetrack, and drawings and quotations from stories explaining the location of the track gathered from residents.

Perhaps what made the racetrack attractive was its provisional importance: for the community of the time, it likely had real value as a site where people could gather, and from which stories would be generated. Wilson's performance serves as an instigator of recollection amongst the descendents of the original community and as a symbolic signpost or marker that such recollection exists amongst communities. Such a premise for a search suggests that success is by no means simply a matter of finding a lost object but that performing the search itself is the real motivation. The performance then becomes a staged or ritualistic event that could include the local community in the process. In this case such activation would not take place as spectacle but rather by way of authentic exchange. Such an event allows for a break in daily routines and quotidian life. If the notion of searching for a chimerical racetrack is initially whimsical, the dynamic Wilson has instigated begins to undermine the opposition between what is serious and what is play. Play even sets its open-ended character against the closure that art can mean. While art is not play, play is a practice that artists draw upon to ensure ongoing destabilizations, disorientation and other forms of interruption by which art differentiates itself from routine behaviours. * Stephen Horne is an art writer living in France and Montréal.

1 Johan Huizinga, quoted in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 2004), 105.





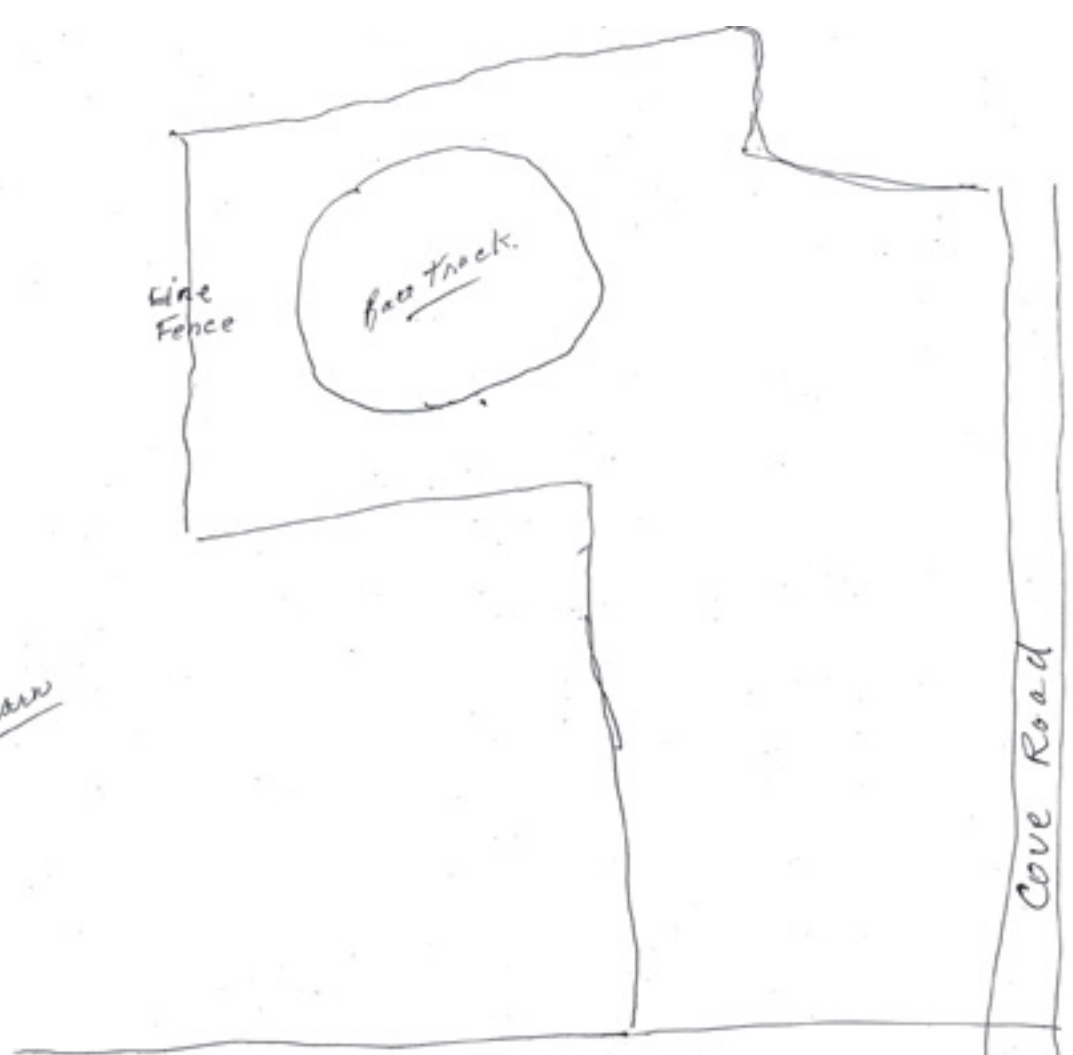
Line
Fence

Gas Track.

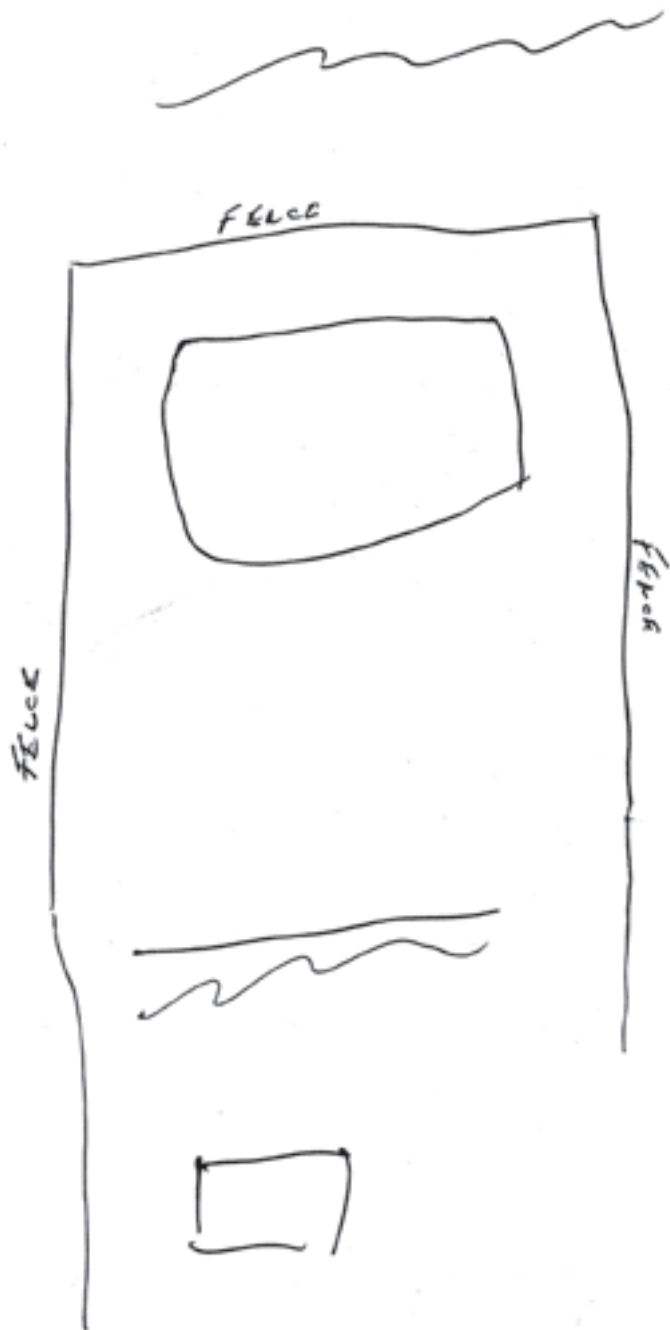
Bar

Cove Road

Road







Sheilah Wilson was born in Caribou River, Nova Scotia. She earned a BA at Mount Allison University in 1999, a BFA from NSCAD University in 2002 and an MFA in Studio Arts at Goldsmiths College in 2004. Wilson has an upcoming residency at Struts Gallery in Sackville New Brunswick in April 2014 and will be part of Eryn Foster's *Pictou Island Portage* in July 2014. She will also be curating a performance series for Ortega y Gasset Projects in Bushwick, New York in June 2014. She is currently Assistant Professor Photography at Denison University in Granville, Ohio.

This project also included an eight-page newspaper with a center-fold of the aerial photo of the track, as well as portions of interviews with local residents and documentation of the placement of the white line that appears in the photo. The newspapers were available at Lee Tik Service Station and were hand delivered to residents of the Cape John peninsula, where the racetrack was located. This project was originally commissioned as part of the W(here) festival in Pictou County, curated by Mary MacDonald in 2012.

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