



**HAL**  
open science

## The Watch Man / Balnakiel

Marina Trakas

► **To cite this version:**

| Marina Trakas. The Watch Man / Balnakiel. 2013. hal-00817343

**HAL Id: hal-00817343**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00817343>**

Submitted on 24 Apr 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Review of Illingworth, Shona (2011). *The Watch Man / Balnakiel*. Belgium, Film and Video Umbrella, 2011, 172 pages, £15.00.

*The Watch Man / Balnakiel* is a monograph about the two major art projects made by Shona Illingworth in 2006 and 2009 respectively. Illingworth is a London-based artist who works across different media (video, sound, photography, drawing) with a special interest in the experience of memory in situations of social tension and trauma.

The first part of the book is dedicated to *The Watch Man*. This section opens with a series of black and white video stills, sound and voice transcripts from the installation. The first circular image that appears is the face of an old man with lost eyes, as if he were mentally disturbed or feeling a deep distress. After this one, other circular images –mostly of the old man’s face– come with a meticulous description, especially of the sounds of the original video installation but also of some of its images, sprinkled with the old man’s intrusive thoughts that are seemingly related to a traumatic past event. The sounds described are the sounds of the assemblage and the disassembly of watches: the old man is a watchmaker. These sounds, which belong to a present temporal framework, are mixed with other sounds and image descriptions that, together with the intrusive thoughts, point to the past –more specifically, to a painful past that has not yet been overcome.

The old man is Shona Illingworth’s father, an army veteran who was one of the first witnesses who found a multitude of emaciated bodies in a Nazi concentration camp named Bergen-Belsen (Germany) near the end of the Second World War. The identity of the old man and his life story is developed in an essay at the end of this section, which has been written by the director of the collection Film and Video Umbrella, and which gives the readers a good introduction and overview of both installations –the Watch Man and Balnakiel. Even if this essay is very enlightening and broadens our understanding of the art installations, the images of the presentation also speak for themselves –with a little help from the voice and sound transcripts. Both of them together take the readers/spectators away from the old man’s present and external world represented by the “chick tick tock” sounds produced by the manipulation and work of the clocks’ metal pieces, directing them towards his dense internal mental life still tied to his traumatic past. The double passage between present/external world to past/internal mind also operates a change of perspective allowing the readers/spectators to

experience *with the old man*—and not as simple observers— a traumatic past, whose details are at first ignored, but whose magnitude is felt through the intensity of the images of his face and some signs in the voice transcripts. In this sense, the combination of both media constitutes a good resource to capture in a book something of the immersive experience that is characteristic of installation art.

If this mixture of images and transcripts allow the readers/spectators to have an experience from the point of view of Illingworth's father, the scientific explanations about traumatic events that succeed place them again in a third-person perspective in relation with the old man's mental experience. This last perspective is the perspective of the expert that, in this case, is represented by Martin A. Conway, a very well-known neuropsychologist and memory researcher with who Shona Illingworth kept up a rich exchange over many years. Martin A. Conway gives an illustrative explanation—in a double sense, because here also the text alternates with some drawings made by himself with the purpose of schematizing the ideas—about the characteristics of traumatic memories, post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome (PTSD), and their impact for the stability of the self. He also expounds how confabulated memories are formed, and how imagination and memory are in fact part of the same default network that gives rise to memories, even true ones.

The second and third sections of the book are focused on *Balnakiel*'s installation. If her first installation refers to the traces left by a traumatic event in the mind and life of an individual—her father—, *Balnakiel* is about traces in an environment—her childhood town—that have persisted throughout time creating in it a particular atmosphere.

The second section constitutes a sort of previous research of the location of the film *Balnakiel*, which contains photos, drawings, text, some voice transcripts of the video as well as a second intervention of Martin A. Conway with explanations and schemas. This section gives an idea of the history of the place: it is a landscape marked by the presence of the military: first, as a look-out station for the British; later, as a military training camp. This remote and extreme landscape is experienced differently by different groups with different histories and interests. If memories of some of the local people are charged with affectivity brought forth by the special atmosphere of *Balnakiel*, the military who train there only create more general and semantic memories lacking in personal details and emotional tone, with the purpose of transferring that knowledge to sites of war and conflict elsewhere in the world. Most of the drawings and texts in this second section refer to these mental schemas, these

ways of seeing and thus remembering this space that characterize the military. Once more, Illingworth plays with the contrast between them and the transcripts and video stills that represent the affective and sensorial memories of different civilian groups of people, original locals and incomers. Conway's explanation helps the readers understand how memories are stored and organized and how general and conceptual frameworks interact with episodic details –or not, as in the military's memories of Balnakiel– in the formation and retrieval of memories.

The third and last section is composed of video stills and some voice transcripts from *Balnakiel*. The aerial photos of the landscape, most of them in black and white, evoke an objective and physical apprehension of the space that once again contrasts with a subjective experience of the landscape that characterizes the foreground and sometimes blurry pictures. However, this last kind of video still does not have so much presence as the aerial shots and the transcripts are a little too short to capture and transmit the more psychological apprehension of the civilians, as well as the differences between the incomers and the original locals. If the aim of the Balnakiel project is, in Illingworth's words, "to explore how these different territories of occupation impact on one another, how physical and psychological landscapes are constructed and in particular, how the military use of landscape affects the civilian population" ([www.apengine.org/2010/03/shona-illingworth/](http://www.apengine.org/2010/03/shona-illingworth/)), the presentation made in the book falls a little short. After a second section mostly focused on the military perception of the landscape, the third section should compensate and emphasize more on the psychological landscapes, on the influences, on the contrasts. Nonetheless, the choice of the photos stresses the physical landscapes and the influence of the military on them, and that is the message and feeling that remains in the readers/spectators at the end of this section.

It is important to mention that each of the sections about *Balnakiel* is complemented by an essay, the first one by Caterina Albano and the second by Jill Bennett, both researchers of art. These critical essays about the exhibition are delightfully written and give a detailed idea of the installation video, of Illingworth's conceptualizations that underlie her work and also of the experience sought on the viewers. Even if these texts constitute a necessary complement to the artistic documentation of the installation, it is a pity that the book does not include an interview with the artist, like the one made by [www.apengine.org](http://www.apengine.org) in 2010. A document of this sort would be extremely useful and valuable for readers who have not had a first-hand experience of the installation.

As Claire Bishop and Julie Reiss have claimed in their respective monographs, an art installation is conceived as a single situation which requires an embodied and active viewer – and not simply a pair of disembodied eyes, like in painting– to get its full meaning. Spectator participation is not only essential but integral to installation art, making it difficult –if not impossible, according to Arthur Danto– to write, analyze and even speak of one piece without having undergone a first-hand experience of it. It would seem from this that readers of *The Watch Man / Balnakiel* who have not been present at the installations would not find any pleasure or interest in reading a book whose content cannot function as a substitute, or even a reproduction of the original piece because of the key characteristic of this particular kind of art. In contrast however, the video stills, together with the voice and sound transcripts, especially in *The Watch Man*, constitute an excellent choice to dislocate the readers/spectators and make them experience different perspectives and different ways of perceiving, relating to and remembering the same event, the same space. The interplay between the first and third person points of view, between external and internal, objective and subjective, physical and psychological suggested by the use of these two media, allows the readers/spectators to capture something of the “what it is like” to attend and go through Shona Illingworth’s installations. In this sense, *The Watch Man / Balnakiel* constitutes not only a documentation for a specific public such as art historians, but also a sort of “book-installation” in itself, certainly different from the original installations, but nevertheless enjoyable for everyone interested in contemporary art, and more precisely for everyone interested in memory studies and interdisciplinary research between art and science.

### References

APEngine (2010). Interview of Shona Illingworth. <http://www.apengine.org/2010/03/shona-illingworth/>

Bishop, C. (2005). *Installation Art: a critical history*. New York: Routledge.

Danto, A. (2001). Postmodern Art and Concrete Selves. The Model of the Jewish Museum. In Danto A., *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 123-143.

Reiss, Julie (2001). *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Marina Trakas, PhD candidate, Department of Cognitive Science, Macquarie University,  
Australia & Institut Jean Nicod, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, France.