

## JANE AND LOUISE WILSON COUNTERMEASURES

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*Countermeasures* refer to military, technological and political contexts; they describe reactive interventions in prevailing systems as well as defensive manoeuvres. As dialectical responses to forces, systems and spaces, they are acts of measuring, weighing up and rubbing up against. Jane and Louise Wilson make these relational dynamics tangible in space. Their art is about architecture, border demarcations and institutional spaces in conjunction with perception and mediality – places that denote not only enclosures, but also power structures and have a psychic impact.

At the Stanley Kubrick Archive they came across an apparently innocuous relic in research photos for set designs: a yardstick painted in black and white, which had been placed in different rooms. It once served as a benchmark in photographs of real buildings, but as it was anchored in the imperial British system of measurement, it is now obsolete. The yardstick becomes a cipher of image production and the modern universalist claim to rationally control spaces, bodies and territories. Like a spectral revenant, it haunts the Wilsons' work and exposes all scales as arbitrary abstract constructs.

There are always at least *two scales*. The term parallax stemming from astronomy describes the shift between two different perspectives on the same reality. Depending on the observer's viewpoint, an object appears differently, without becoming integrated into a stable overall picture. In the context of the Cold War, it was taken up as a political metaphor and popularised by Alan J. Pakula's thriller *The Parallax View* (1974), so that the parallax came to stand for manipulated perception. The Wilsons declare the *parallax view* to be a productive principle.

As an artist duo, Jane and Louise Wilson investigate conceptual micro- and macrostructures in video and sound installations, photography, sculpture, drawing and collage. Their work arose in the Young British Artists' milieu of the 1990s, and operates in a context of positions that critically question existing orders in the post-Cold War era, also in view of the proclaimed 'End of History'.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of their practice is the lens-based exploration of politically-charged buildings: military facilities, no-go zones, border strips and mess halls. On the basis of intensive research, they gained access early on to covert locations – sometimes as the first civilians – and made them visible to the public, such as the former Stasi prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, restricted areas of the British Houses of Parliament or the key bases of the Russian space programme. They always explore such spaces with four eyes, two bodies, and from two perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> See primarily Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

The dialogical applies not only to their practice as an artist duo, but is also deeply rooted in the specifics of their lives. Jane and Louise Wilson are identical twins. They studied at two art academies, made a collective final degree show submission and received two equal grades for the same work. The medium of the moving picture is their dialogic memory in the sense of Vilém Flusser, whereby the image is subject to mediation between viewer, apparatus, and the world.<sup>2</sup> The camera becomes a medium to establish relations. The artists film each other, appearing in the picture multiplied and spectral. In *GAMMA* (1999), a piece about a former military base, a twin site to the area where the Skulpturenhalle is now situated, they perform in re-enactments of military monitoring routines. Production and camera handling in their works are precise; using a camera dolly, the hovering movements and pans create a surreal sense of space with a cool polished cinematic quality. Multi-channel projections unfold in space, often choreographed with the help of mirrors.

As pioneers of multi-screen installations Jane and Louise Wilson have made a major contribution to the development of video as a spatial sculptural medium. Up to 16 visual channels multiply the image in their works and cause perspectives to clash. Dualities foster ambivalence: inner/outer, visible/invisible, movement/at rest, East/West. Rather than depicting spaces directly, novel medial self-reflective spatial experiences arise from the atmospheres created by movements, vistas and glimpses. The video installation becomes a walk-in sculpture and acts as a post-minimal counterpoint to a rational survey. Temporality and relationships are reflected in the installations, making shifts of scale perceptible, along with asymmetries of power and the instability of spatial arrangements.

"We are concerned with psychic architecture," the artists explain, "with how architecture holds memory – how a space can register what's been lost or transformed over time." Shifts, visual duplication and mirroring intensify the irrational, surreal and science fiction-like dimensions of modernist places in a visual mode influenced by the British Gothic style. Architectural constructions, such as the bunker of the Nazis' Atlantic Wall in the *Sealander* photographs (2006), appear like fossil relicts and romantically coded emblems oscillating between future promise and ruin. They evoke the psychic spaces of the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, to whom the artists refer time and again – spaces in which the Modern does not appear progressive, but rather as permeated by deterioration, dissociation and metaphysical unease. Although their original function has become obsolete, the inscribed orders continue to have an effect.

Architectural, media and psychological layers are closely interweaved. The bunkers are of interest to the artists also as prototypes of Modernist architectures of perception in the sense of Paul Virilio, which organise,

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<sup>2</sup> See Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, University of Minnesota Press 2011 (Electronic Mediations), originally Göttingen 1985, especially pp. 51–68.

manipulate and control vision, and thus power.<sup>3</sup> The engagement with the historical and current technologies of vision is a central theme in the Wilsons' work; the somnambulant fictions of cinema provide a referential framework throughout. Since the 2010s, they have also engaged with camouflage strategies from the First World War, an irradiated documentary film from Chernobyl, and algorithmic recognition procedures that render bodies, gestures, and faces legible. It is not so much the efficiency of the method that they point to as unsettling, but the way perception becomes identification, while seeing implies classification. Cinema, Hypnosis and surveillance imagery constitute a field of medial suggestion in the Wilsons' practice, in which the boundary between fiction and reality becomes unstable. Reality is shown to be constructed and brought forth through performance by way of regimes of seeing and medial operations. Video is not evidence, but a conceptual countermeasure to the dominant politics of seeing. In the world of today, where images are reproduced as translated, automatically assessed and mass-produced codes, the Wilsons' work takes on additional relevance.

The first exhibition of Jane and Louise Wilsons' work in Germany for over twenty years has been developed in close collaboration with the artists, at a time of renewed geopolitical tensions and military conflicts. Taking the Skulpturenhalle as its starting point and its location near the grounds of a former NATO and US military missile base surrounded by fields, it brings together key video installations, architectural photographs and other camera-based works in dialogue with the works made in Korea and Japan since 2018, which are more organically oriented. The artists' archive materials offer insight into their laborious, investigative research processes. Spatially, a continuum unfolds, extending from monumental institutional structures, and the human face to the smallest natural contexts such as cell structures and radiation. Thematically, the works tie together a network of architecture, identity and media as well as ecological and socially interconnected coexistence. The Wilsons' relational studies take on extra dimensions within the framework of the Anthropocene. Within the dynamic interplay of pervasive technology, ecological dependence and social connectedness – and ever more images – the limits of human control are being renegotiated.

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<sup>3</sup> See Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology*, Princeton Architectural Press 2008, originally Munich/Vienna 1992, pp. 17–54.