

Media

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STRAIGHT ART AND SLIPPING STANDARDS

The Marty St. James and Anne Wilson Interview

Sometimes an event, an idea or concept catches the popular imagination and, often unexpectedly, grabs the attention of everyone from Fleet Street hacks to the great unwashed public.

Hotel, reviewed elsewhere in the magazine, is just such an event. Drawing the attention of everyone from 'The Face' and the Sunday sup's to TV listings mag 'O1 for London', the "relentless glamour", as Louisa Buck would have it ('Face', February 1989), of *Hotel* has been an arts publicist's dream. Mass coverage and audiences to match.

Being so obviously in the spotlight, however, brings its problems too and, tonight, as I track the two artist hoteliers, St. James and Wilson, down in an upstairs office at AIR, Marty and Anne are stoically confronting just one of those problems. That evening, a London paper, The Evening Standard, had printed what amounted to an attack on *Hotel* and the two artists responsible. According to the article, "...performance artists haven't done themselves any favours here, being inclined to talk of their work in ludicrously inflated tones" while, "bewildering art-speak produces general suspicion and in-

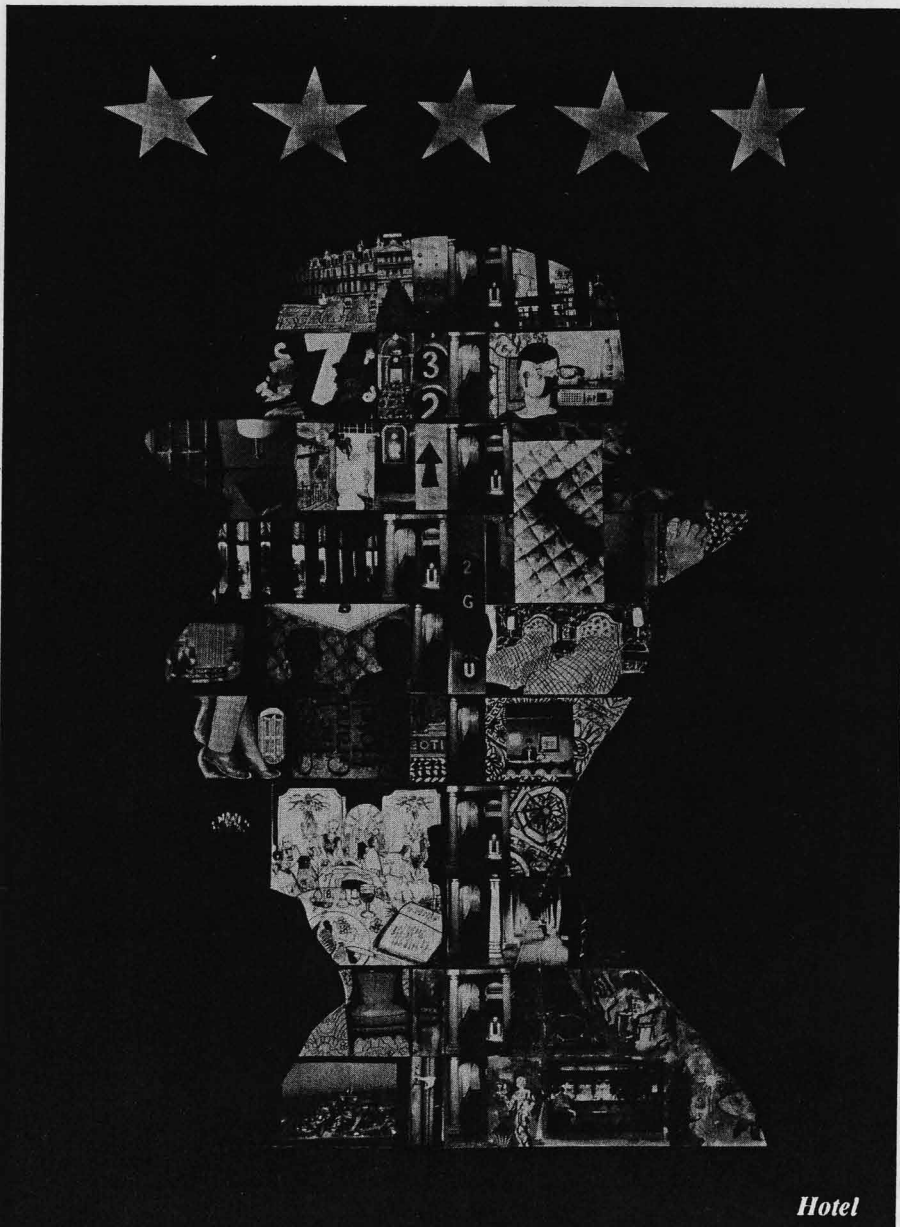
comprehension." (Marty St. James and Anne Wilson, incidentally, are as clear and straightforward in the piece without a whiff of the "artspeak" which so upsets the Standard).

The tone of the piece is a grim reminder of Grub Street's anachronistic stance. When it comes to art it seems that landscape painting is, just about, OK. Mention "performance art", however - and James/Wilson have worked extensively in performance - and it's time to bring out the 'Wotaloadofrubbish' headlines. Neither of the two artists seem upset, just bemused that even in the late 80's with performance art feeding into the mainstream - you can catch 'visual theatre' at innumerable theatres throughout London - such attitudes can still get aired. "It's like something out of the early 70's", says Marty St. James. Anne Wilson, meanwhile, is concerned that the bad write-up won't go down well with the sponsors of the exhibition. ("At least," she smiles, "they can't say it was all done on Arts Council money - we didn't get any for the AIR piece").

(It later emerges that the writer of the piece had been subjected to a cut'n'splice reworking of her original article which had turned the meaning of the piece around. She rings the Gallery to apologise, claiming that the original text had been hacked to pieces by a thrill-hungry features editor).

Amused rather than perturbed, the artists offer me a coffee while I point the cassette deck in their direction. Both students at Cardiff Art College, it quickly emerges that the two of them came together through a shared interest in, as Marty says, "putting things together ... working in assemblage. Anne was making huge paintings that were amalgams of things while I was doing a similar thing but in performance - bringing things together but in time and space". Anne comments, "There was also formal sharing of ideas and subject matter... We were both interested in things like ballroom dancing which other people weren't really touching on."

With their first joint performance piece at a Dutch gallery in 1982 - "When we got on the ferry," recalls St. James, "we didn't have a clue what we were going to do". They ended up doing a 12 hour perform-



ance titled *Aliens* - the two artists have continued to work together in a variety of mediums. It's their performance pieces and video works which have been most widely seen, however. Do they see themselves primarily as performers?

MARTY ST. JAMES: No. I think we see ourselves as visual artists - if that's not too pretentious. We work in all sorts of ways.

ANNE WILSON: People pick up on the performances because... well, because they happen, I suppose. We've always made pictures and drawings to all our work but they've been things that people don't get to see too much.

Responding to the question of whether the duo see themselves as belonging to a particular style or idea of performance art, they state that what they do, what their art is about, is closer to the traditions of Turner or the diarist De Foe.

AW: We relate to artists that have used their life and the time they lived in, really. People sometimes misunderstand what we do because we use things in our work which are so close to everyone's ordinary everyday lives. So do lots of other artists but if they have been dead a couple of hundred years, it becomes... I mean, it takes on a different form. We share ideas with lots of artists. We've never had that close an affinity with people who work in video or performance.

With a back catalogue of video works and performances that have frequently dealt with romance, fantasy and "middlebrow" culture, James and Wilson have often been charged, not least by myself, with creating an art that is more kitsch than content. Is their work a celebration of things like ballroom dancing or are they making fun out of those things? Is the intention to produce parody?

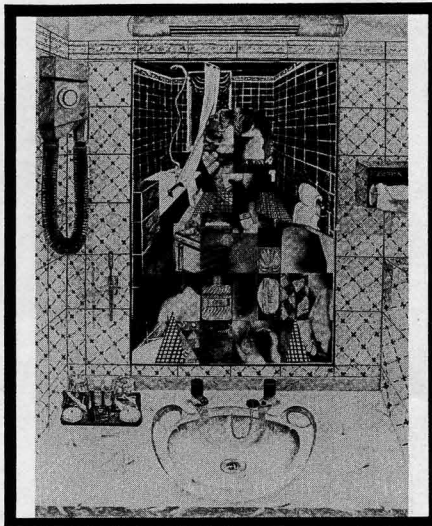
AW: No. It isn't making fun out of those things. We wouldn't make fun of those things.

MSJ: It's more of a recognition or celebration of those things, I suppose. It's NOT a pisstake. We're not involved in pisstaking. We're not dealing with that middle-class trip which is taking the piss out of things which aren't necessarily middle-class pursuits. The things we deal with are actually very close to us. I mean, we actually studied ballroom dancing for two years. It's not a joke to us.

With childhoods that they describe as "not dissimilar", the two artists talk of how much a part of their lives have been influenced by ballroom dancing, Mills and Boons and a culture which Marty des-

cribes as "working class". ("Ballroom dancing is one of the few things men and women can share a skill in without any sexual overtones", says Anne. "We wanted to tell cultural stories about men and women. If you called it ballet, people wouldn't ask that question").

Discussing the frequent references to romantic fiction, one of their videos is titled *TrueLife Romance*, which appear in their tapes and live art works, I ask if it couldn't be argued that they were demeaning the women - and men, for that matter - who lose themselves in another world of strong heroes and perfect love.



"The things, the characters, in our tapes are not our imaginations. These are things that have happened to us."

Wilson's response is immediate - "We aren't taking the piss out of people who read those books" - and she is quick to explain that "We always use things as they are. We could do metaphors and analogies but those characters you see in our tapes reading Mills and Boons aren't fictions, in a sense. They're drawn from real people. People that we've seen in hotel lobbies reading those books...that's the way they look and that's the way it happens. Occasionally it's very easy to misinterpret it, but that's the way we work."

MSJ: The things, the characters, in our tapes are not our imaginations. These are things that have happened to us.

What about *Hotel* itself? Did they feel it had worked?

MSJ: What we wanted to do was for people to come along to the hotel and feel that they actually made it come alive as, if you like, guests. So that it almost doesn't exist without their presence. They actually make it come alive so that it puts the emphasis back on the viewer.

They talk, too, of the fragmentation of the hotel experience and the way in which hotels compartmentalise activities and ideas. They describe the research they undertook, staying at Eastbourne's Grant Hotel, as the springboard to an idea they'd been thinking of for years. ("It was always an idea but we never knew quite how to develop it", says Anne). "We visit a lot of hotels anyway, both here and abroad," states St. James, "and we've always kept diaries about those visits."


What about the tape?

MSJ: I think this is the first tape where we've managed to layer sound and image and hold those layers together.

AW: It's also to do with acquiring confidence in a language. We've always made short tapes but this one is longer.

Currently at work on an idea being taken up by Artangel Trust involving a 'live' civic monument - "It's been two years in the making", says Marty, "but it looks as though it might happen this summer" - they are also in the "primary stages" of a new video tape which will, at least partly, be to do with a recent visit to the USSR and the sense of unreality the two of them felt about a trip which had been marred by the death of their close friend and associate Steve Rogers.

As the interview closes, I ask if there's anything they'd like to say. Anne Wilson concerned, perhaps, about the notion that the James/Wilson style is one of lampoon, responds with a few words about the ballroom dancers who have been appearing at the *Hotel* venue. "We actually get two real ballroom dancers in because we felt we'd used it and it would be nice if it could use us. It's a very skilled discipline, very physical. They were pleased, too, because they want ballroom dancing to be viewed as an art form."

"It was great", says Marty St. James, "for ballroom dancing to be happening in an art gallery in front of an art crowd who'd never seen anything like that before." 

Nik Houghton