

VOICE OVER

a work by

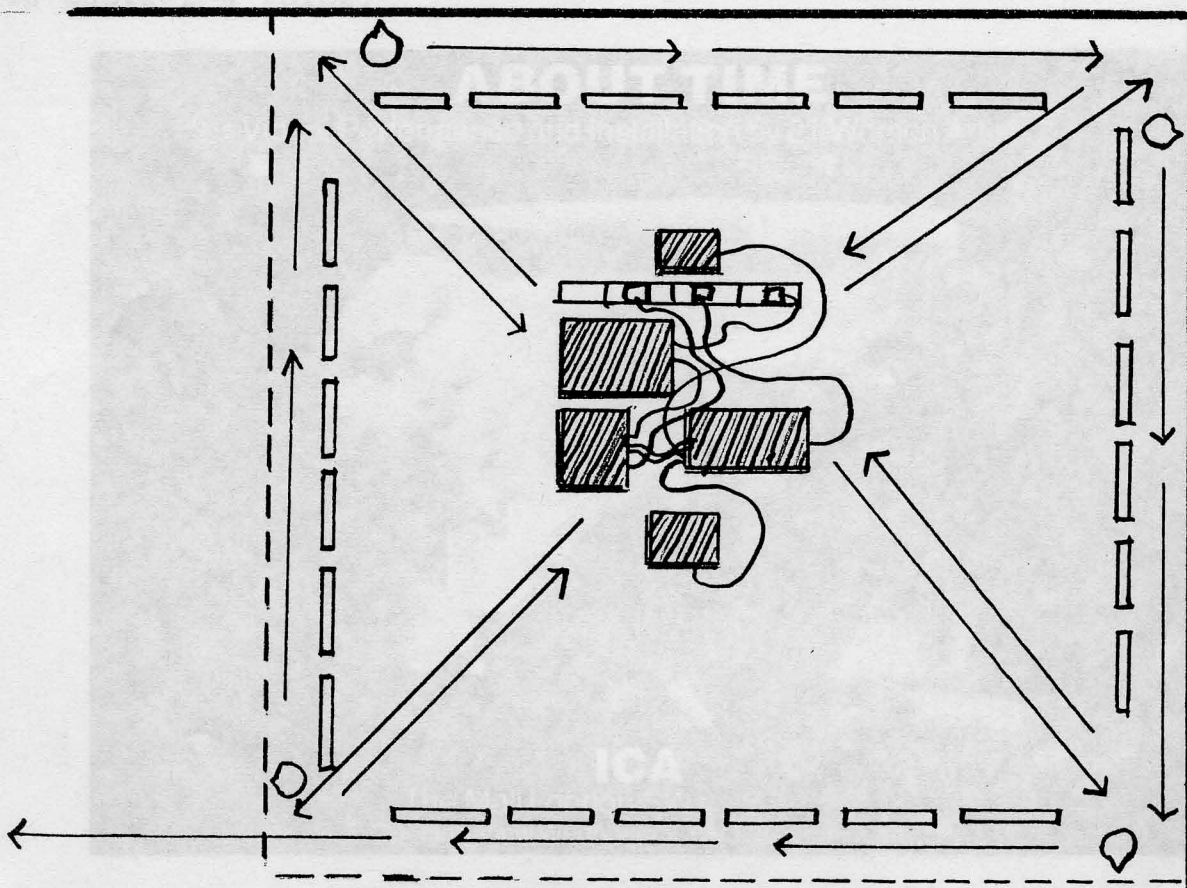
Catherine Elwes

The Basement

Newcastle May 3, 1980

Description of work

The audience is seated on one row of chairs which describes a square within an irregular space. The chairs face inwards onto a cassette sound system which is initially the only source of light in the space. The performer moves into the centre of the space and switches on the cassette machine. She moves to one corner and faces the wall in the two foot space left between it and the audience. A faint sound of chimes is established over which a radio play is faded in - only just audibly. Within 30 seconds the performer's voice on tape asks the first question: "I suppose you found her in some obscure hiding place". The performer live answers from a script which she illuminates with a small torch: "I found her very easily. She was working quietly in a large cool room with long windows I stood uneasily at the back and watched her. I wasn't sure how she would receive me." The torch goes out for the next question and returns to illuminate the performer's script for her answer. She now stands facing the wall a yard or so further along. 13 questions are posed and answered during which time the performer moves the length of one wall. Her answers get progressively louder as the chimes on the tape gain volume. After the 13th answer, the chimes recede over a full minute and the tape ends with a loud, continuous tone. The performer moves to the machines, rewinds the tape and switches it back on. The questions resume and the performer moves as before along the length of the next wall. The questions are the same but the answers have changed. The cycle is repeated four times as the performer travels the four sides of the square.



In this work, I used a theatrical dialogue to communicate certain ideas and feelings. The authority and didacticism of this form was underlined and to some extent undermined by the use of repetition, by overt reference to a script and by the positioning of the audience relative to the performer - them facing inwards, focussing on the machines and the voice of authority, and me turned to the wall reading the script, answering the voice of authority.

The preconceptions expressed in the content of the questions remained unchanged as they repeated. Their inadequacy became more apparent as my answers evolved. Four separate "truths" were presented by me in contrast to the static, mechanical and decreasingly dominant questions on the tape.

The inflexibility of the machine voice's personality contrasted with the changeability of both the performer's reported experience and that of the third woman referred to in the text. The stability of any rigid social structure is always threatened by unclassifiable and apparently aberrant behaviour. Ideas of normality are instrumental in outlawing the range and variability of woman's experience. Language is not designed to express the experience of "muted" groups; however, certain forms of language in art are fluid and undefined and so can accommodate and to some extent alleviate the difficulties of trying to speak as it were with another's voice.

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