

James Beckett

Dowsing Schools: Preliminary Findings and Corresponding Survey Kits, 2013

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THE PHYSICS ROOM

A CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT SPACE

Dowsing Schools: A review

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The challenges faced with restaging a dowser's toolkit- a practice often associated with credulous and fallacious reasoning- into a gallery setting provokes a profitable friction for reevaluating the laws of empirical knowledge. The productive tension between autonomous "others" found in Beckett's latest work rouses the viewer with a question- is there really any difference between truth in science and truth in art? Each discipline has a history of progress, each grapples with technological limitations and each houses a logical theory of validity. By translating the heavily site-specific practice of dowsing into a new environment, Beckett begins to investigate the central question of how to connect the cognitive with the aesthetic.

For Beckett, a Zimbabwean-born artist based in the Netherlands, this is his first New Zealand show. Hosted by Artspace earlier this year, *Dowsing Schools* combines audio recordings and found objects in the format of a museological diorama. Two large vitrines run along the east-facing wall of the gallery, housing natural and industrially-made divining rods in one and twentieth century publications on dowsing in the other. Almost theatrical in nature, upon the gallery floor lies a checkerboard of uplifted paving stones suggesting a supposed transcendence of time and space. In addition, exploiting the museological aesthetics of times gone by, a staged assortment of coordinate axes, shovels and measuring wheels fill the remaining gallery space.

A crucial component in this installation are the two alternating audio recordings which provide a continuous commentary from English dowsers John Baker and David Lockwood with whom Beckett collaborated. In describing their methods, the two dowsers articulate their practices differently from one another, with Baker emphasising the pseudo-scientific nature of his methods and Lockwood describing the importance of spirituality and psychic connection. In essence, the dowsers' commentaries serve both as a literal description of their water-divining activities but also as a metaphor for the exhibition itself - an excavation of a subculture praxis that mimics and simultaneously operates autonomously from institutional legitimization.

Rendering himself somewhere between a sociologist of archeological history and an anthropologist of museological traditions, we witness Beckett crafting something new within an unknown context.

Citing the Industrial Revolution as one of his main muses, Beckett often employs a research-based approach to his work.¹ In conjunction with his visual practice, Beckett has increasingly engaged with sound in his installation works. A member of the international musicians collective, N-Collective, Beckett's manipulation of repeated sound and patterned noise is clearly evidenced in *Dowsing Schools*. With no visual reference to the specific schools surveyed or any provision for supporting qualitative data, the audio recordings form a fundamental component in one's appreciation of the work. Arguably, the presence of the 'plane table'- a medieval means of map-making- would alone lack the didacticism that Beckett hopes to achieve in his attempt to resocialize dowsing. Therein, an analogy between the workings of the installation and the relationship between dowsers and modern society is cleverly illustrated in this exhibition, with Beckett emphasizing the act of conversation as integral in the practice's resocialization.

Generally speaking, dowsing or water-witching, is a form of divination that uses amplifiers or rods rather than scientific apparatus in an attempt to locate ground water, buried metals, oil and other natural or inanimate objects. Locating an object by such occult means makes for an undeniably speculative practice, one that could easily be repudiated as absurdly paranormal "hocus-pocus." The Physics Room's catalogue essay defines dowsing as existing at "the threshold between science and a pagan ritual" and in turn, I would argue that the work itself is situated at a threshold. The dispersal of props across the gallery floor evokes associations with the display mechanisms employed by museums, leaving the viewer questioning whether Beckett is employing such tropes as a means of institutional validation or conversely, to deride the importance placed on museological legitimization.

Channeling anecdotal instances rather than creating his own empirical data, Beckett illustrates the malleable dichotomy between science and art. Where science disallows the individually variable characteristics of ordinary man, unique circumstances are what spark the creative artist's means of expression. Nevertheless, in essence, both art and science function as instances of communication, contributing to our cognitive enterprise by transforming, idealizing and formalizing our reality.² In *Dowsing Schools*, Beckett both challenges and celebrates the incomplete and fragmentary nature of both art and science, alluding to the intrinsic obstacle faced in any empirical inquiry- mutual dependency. Both art and science can only develop, communicate and integrate an idea by first selecting from a myriad of empirical

¹ Artspace interview, *James Beckett, g. bridle discuss their projects with Caterina Riva*, 3rd May 2014 Available: <http://vimeo.com/94599621> [accessed 25.09.14]

² Axel Gelfert, "Art History, the problem of style, and Arnold Hauser's contribution to the history and sociology of knowledge", *Studies in European Thought*, Vol. 64, Issue 1-2, May 2012, pp. 134-135

findings or visions, thereby predetermining the outcome of the product.³ By placing the dowsing instruments in the gallery, accompanied by the dowsers' commentaries, Beckett exemplifies just how these cognitive and aesthetic realms relate.

Though the schools at which the surveying originally took place remain merely ancillary to the artwork itself, the context within which the viewer experiences the work, namely The Physics Room, is crucial. Cognition is inextricably linked to how and where the apprehending of information originally takes place, thereby making the act of processing knowledge a situated experience. By restaging the esoteric practice of water divination within an exoteric space, Beckett has provided an open invitation for the public to engage with the objects in a space that allows for the rational and irrational; the empirical and theoretical. By recounting Baker and Lockwood's experiences via audio recording, the viewer might find themselves oscillating between the supposed "neutral" space of "scientific truth" and the insecure, changeable sphere of art. However, it could be contended that they are in fact straddling the two; situated at the overlapping limits of cognitive inquiry. As the experiences of the dowsers and audience alike are spatially, temporally and socially conditioned, so too are scientific discoveries and artistic expressions.

Whether Beckett's intentions are to simply observe or actively promote, I would argue that the point of activity becomes secondary to the profitable friction *Dowsing Schools* sparks for resocializing our own perceptions of where art and science divide.

Bibliography

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³ Ibid.