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Francesco Tenaglia, "Coincidence as Sublime: Rachel Rose," *Mousse Magazine*, Fall, 2018

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CONVERSATIONS

Coincidence as a Sublime: Rachel Rose

Rachel Rose interviewed by Francesco Tenaglia



Wil-o-Wisp, presented at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, is an installation by Rachel Rose exploring the life of Elspeth Blake—a mother and mystic who lived rural England between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this conversation, Rose discusses witchcraft and occultism; the transition from an animist perspective to a rationalistic one and its effects on how humans interrelate and understand reality; and using the past to think about the future.

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Francesco Tenaglia: I understand your *Wil-o-Wisp* project took some time to research.

Rachel Rose: I started working on it at the end of 2015. I was experiencing coincidences, I wanted to know what they meant, how they have been framed in history. This led me to the history of coincidences as a plot device in storytelling, which led me to William Shakespeare's use of coincidences, which led me to the world around him when he was working, which led me to the life of magic in seventeenth-century agrarian England, which led me back to coincidence. The worldview in this landscape at the time was animist, increasingly encroached on by the rationalism developing as a pretext for the agricultural revolution, and then the Industrial Revolution. That's how I ended up at this time and place.

FT: The Industrial Revolution suddenly made it necessary to work side by side with numerous other people. And then the advent of sports, which many might not know was about preparation for war. Basically, sports were invented in England to cultivate a fitter youth for war. And there were also cultural shifts in women's roles.

RR: The mass privatization of public land changed agrarian communities—the role of women, who were the healers and had been by default almost like political leaders, changed. Silvia Federici writes about how it was necessary to persecute women to disperse these communities that had strongholds on land that now there was a need to privatize and sell off. The place of women changed dramatically, and symbolically, this related to this new change in perspective towards the forest and the field.

FT: So the witchcraft trials were a way in which power was taken away from women.

RR: Women were persecuted and killed. That's a pretty dramatic removal of their power. But the piece was a way for me to look at this transition from an animist perspective to a rational one, how that changed a relationship to the forest.

FT: What exactly do you mean by “animist”?

RR: For example, it was believed that if someone coughed when they were sick, and then the next day a gust of wind blew down a tree that crushed their house, it might have been said, “Oh, that wind that caused your house to crush was caused by your cough.” That idea of interconnection, that we might now see as surreal, was everywhere at that time.

FT: You're more interested in the philosophical basis of how a group of people can feel entitled to say, “This is rational and this is not rational.”

RR: Yes, exactly. We cut off a lot from our experience when we perform being in the world through what we see as rational now, and that same perspective that guides our idea of time, travel, home... Has at least been partially formed by the forces that caused this an early wave of mass destruction.

FT: I'm thinking here of some of the very earliest film projections, showing a train running into the audience. Of course this is moving away from the specific points of your work, but speaking more generally about how world building, reality making, interests you as an artist working with video.

RR: Each work I make is different. For example, in this work, I was drawing on early techniques of “magic” in cinema, so I used a rear projection screen on the set in Plymouth (where we shot), and placed it throughout *Wil-o-Wisp*. The film that you see at the end of *Wil-o-Wisp*, is an excerpt from the 1935 film *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was made using this same technique of rear projection, to design a surreal depth—a “magic” of the forest. I've never worked with rear projection before and likely won't again, each work I work with techniques that connect to what needs to be expressed.

FT: I see you're interested in cinema as a form. Would you see yourself making a film at some point?

RR: I hope so.

FT: You started in painting—then you transitioned to more narrative forms of art making.

RR: The principles of color, gravity, edge in painting, are central to making anything visual. I work with forms of stories now because they serve as containers, characters and arcs hold layers in a way that's similar to the edges of the rectangle.

FT: A lot of the articles that have been written about you stress your use of composition, and especially editing, to modulate the perceptions of the viewer, to work with the perception of what's seen technically, physically, practically, and relate this to your backstory in painting. What do you think about this?

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RR: I think it's my job, any artist's job, to feel every second, edge and layer of every image.

FT: What are you into right now? What are you thinking about?

RR: I'm working on another piece set in the same time period. When I finish it, I will have been in this world of rural England, in this timeframe, for almost four years.

FT: Can I ask for specifics on the new project?

RR: I'm on lockdown. I suppose I can say that it's a way for me to think about a future.

FT: What do you mean by that? How can one think about the future by thinking about the past?

RR: If I think *directly* about the future, I'm stuck repositioning it through all the murky subjectivity of my present that I'm not aware of. For me, leaving the present is a way to consciously choose to think in different states—in this case, one where magic was real—and occupying a different state is one way to imagine the future, a time when our state will be different than it is now.

FT: A construction of some sort of past.

RR: I'm not making these works to reconstruct the past.

FT: How does effectively living in this period affect your thinking around time and human relations?

RR: It depends on where I am in the project. Definitely there have been moments during when I have experienced more coincidences. Recently, I've been spotting crystal orbs (the small table top versions) everywhere! Most of the time it doesn't feel like that—it just feels like work.

FT: Have you ever been unnerved by a coincidence?

RR: A coincidence feels like a momentary dip into something fuller. In seventeenth-century agrarian England, coincidences were crucial to the way that people conceived of their own being. Now, they aren't crucial. Why has that changed, what does that say about how we are now?

FT: In your past interviews, you frequently cite the idea of a breaking point to talk about what's real, and seeing behind it. I'm not entirely sure I understand it correctly, that this "behind" is reality per se. You say it in a post-structural way, as in, reality is a construction.

RR: Hmm.

FT: A deeper reality? I'm so curious about that. As in, a reality that I don't know from the times of shamans or saints, or that some priest or mystic could achieve?

RR: I'm very interested in that.

FT: Okay. Do you practice a specific, single religion?

RR: I have, and I hope I will again.

FT: What do you think is the maximum potential of art making? What is the maximum scope, the maximum possible result—not in terms of economic or popular success, but in terms of what you can transmit to another person, a receiver of your work. Is this idea connected to the existence of a deeper reality?

RR: A film, piece of music, writing, artwork can develop and then hold a shared feeling that that's inside us. It can externalize and contain something you don't know you feel, but you do—like a premonition.

FT: Creating a form of togetherness. Are you also a musician?

RR: I do all my sound editing and re-working of music for my work, and I think through all story with sound—I'm always learning new techniques in sound, it's endlessly exciting.

at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin

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