

OK . . . So, I Still Believe in This

Betina



Text from performance by Betina. Presented June, 1990. Thesis presentation for M.F.A in Photography from the Rhode Island School of Design.

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HELEN JOANNE IS LEARNING TO DRIVE. YOU ARE PRONE AGAINST THE FALSE FLOOR THAT IS REALLY THE THIRD BACK SEAT FLATTENED INTO A SUPPORT FOR FOUR SMALL BODIES. SOMEONE YOU DONT KNOW WHO MAYBE PATRICIA MAYBE CHARLES IS ASLEEP HER MOUTH MAYBE HIS MOUTH REGULARLY WARMING WITH MOIST AIR THE SMALL SPACE BEHIND YOUR LEFT KNEE. YOU STRETCH YOUR RIGHT LEG AND PLACE YOUR TOES AGAINST THE ELECTRONIC WINDOW OPENER. THE CAR IS TURNING WIDE CIRCLES IN THE ASPHALT PARKING LOT OF THE COUNTY PARK. JOHN IS TELLING HELEN JOANNE THIS WILL BE EASY NOTHING TO IT. THE CAR STOPS THE SMALL BREEZE FROM THE MOVEMENT THROUGH SPACE IS GONE. YOU HEAR THE DOOR OPEN AND CLOSE. YOU ARCH YOUR NECK AND PEER JUST OVER THE SECOND BENCH SEAT. JOHN IS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE CAR WITH BOTH ELBOWS BENT HIS HANDS AT FACE LEVEL FINGERS JOINED AND MOTIONING TOWARD HIS BODY. YOU FEEL A THUD. JOHN WHO WAS STANDING NEAR THE FRONT BUMPER IS ON THE GROUND.



HELEN JOANNE SAYS THAT THE ROAD WILL BE WIDENED. THE HEDGE SOME SIXTY FEET OF IT IS NOW ON PUBLIC LAND. YOU GO TO THE EDGE OF THE ROAD AND LOOK TOWARD THE FIELD. YOU CAN NO LONGER CROSS THE ROAD WITHOUT PERMISSION OR WITHOUT SOMEONE HELPING LOOK BOTH WAYS. SUSIE GOES WITH YOU. YOU WANT TO HOLD HANDS BUT HELEN JOANNE SAYS THAT IF ONE TRIPS YOU COULD BOTH BE HURT. HELEN JOANNE SPEAKS IN EUPHEMISMS ABOUT MORTALITY. YOU RACE WITHOUT SPEAKING TOWARD THE FAR END OF THE FIELD. A TRAIN IS COMING AND YOU SIGNAL THE ENGINEER WITH A PULLING OF YOUR RIGHT ARM THROUGH THE AIR FIST HIGH THEN LOW. HE DOESNT SEE YOU OR DOESNT WANT TO BLOW THE WHISTLE YOU DONT KNOW WHICH BUT YOU GET THE MAN IN THE CABOOSE TO WAVE AT YOU ANYWAY. YOUR RIGHT ARM COMES DOWN HARD ON SUSIES SHOULDER. SHE PULLS YOU TO THE GROUND GRABBING FOR YOUR HAIR WHICH DOESNT HURT BECAUSE HELEN JOANNE HAS DECIDED THAT YOUR FACE IS TOO DELICATE FOR ANYTHING BUT A PIXIE CUT. AS YOU TUMBLE HUNTER PANTS BARKS PUSHES HIS NOSE COVERED WITH WARM TOMATO PULP INTO YOUR FACE. YOU SEARCH BETWEEN THE ROWS OF CORN FOR THE DISCARD PILE FROM WHICH HUNTER EATS AT THE END OF THE DAY. YOU FIND WHERE HARVEY LEFT IT. YOU PUSH YOUR HANDS AGAINST THE BRONZED RED AND GREEN AND ORANGE. YOU IMAGINE THAT YOU HAVE BEEN ASLEEP BUT ITS ONLY THE HEAT AND THE LONG SHADOWS OF THE CORN AND TOMATOES MIXING WITH THE RIVER BOTTOM SOIL. SUSIE SAYS IT WONT GET ANY COOLER TONIGHT UNLESS THERE IS A STORM THERE ARE NO CLOUDS AND THE CAT IS NOT EATING GRASS. HARVEY WILL BE BACK TOMORROW MORNING IN PERFECTLY PRESSED LONG SLEEVED WHITE SHIRT AND DARK PANTS MAYBE BLACK MAYBE BROWN YOU DO NOT KNOW WHICH AND A LIGHT GREY STRAW HAT WITH A BRIM NEITHER TOO WIDE NOR TOO NARROW. YOU TURN TOWARD THE HOUSE AND PLACE YOUR HAND PALM DOWN PERPENDICULAR TO YOUR LINE OF VISION. YOU MOVE YOUR HAND UP AND DOWN UNTIL YOU SEE WHAT THE HOUSE WILL LOOK LIKE WITHOUT THE HEDGE IN FRONT.



HELEN JOANNE SAYS THAT YOU LIVE ON THE WEST EAST AXIS BUT YOU CAN NEVER REMEMBER IF YOU ARE EAST OF BONNER OR WEST OR EAST OF KANSAS CITY OR WEST. YOU GO OUT TO THE EDGE OF THE ROAD LOOK TOWARD THE RISING SUN AND IMAGINE BONNER TO YOUR BACK. THE RIVER IS TO YOUR RIGHT AND THE BLUFF TO YOUR LEFT. YOU KNOW THE KAW IS TO YOUR RIGHT THOUGH YOU HAVE NEVER WALKED THAT FAR AND YOU CANT SEE IT. BEFORE YOU COULD TOUCH THE RIVERS EDGE THERE IS THE FIELD OF CORN AND TOMATOES AND A FEW RHUBARB PLANTS HIDDEN HERE AND THERE. THE GOOSEBERRY BUSHES ARE AN OBSTACLE AND YOU OFTEN FIND YOURSELF ASLEEP AFTER PASSING OUT FROM EATING SO MANY GREEN BERRIES IN THE TOO HOT SUN. YOU PLACE A RHUBARB LEAF OVER YOUR HEAD AND WAIT FOR RECOVERY. AT THE EDGE OF THE FIELD IS A RAISED LEDGE ATOP WHICH STORMS THE TRAIN AND WHICH YOU CANT SEE OVER. THE KAW IS DOWN THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LEDGE YOU HAVE HEARD BUT HELEN JOANNE WILL NOT LET YOU CROSS THE TRACKS SO YOU HAVE HAD TO TAKE HER WORD FOR IT. TO KNOW FOR SURE YOU CLIMB TO THE TOP OF THE BLUFF. SUSIE GOES WITH YOU. YOU ALWAYS CLIMB TOGETHER. HELEN JOANNE SAYS THAT GIRLS SHOULDNT GO OFF BY THEMSELVES. GOING STRAIGHT UP THE BLUFF IS IMPOSSIBLE. YOU WANT TO SIT OUT ON THE LIMESTONE LEDGE BUT IT LOOKS TOO THIN TO SUPPORT THE WEIGHT OF TWO. YOU GO ONE AT A TIME. YOU CAN SEE THE RIVER BUT YOU CAN NO LONGER SEE THE HOUSE OR THE ROAD. YOU CONTINUE A WINDING PATH TOWARD THE TOP AND FIND A TOO DRY SPOT ON THE HILL. YOU TASTE THE DIRT EACH TIME YOU PUSH YOUR SEAT HARD AGAINST THE EARTH TO MAKE THE SLIDE DOWN. YOUR HISTORY BOOK SAYS THAT THE HOUSE WAS ONCE UNDER A SALTY SEA. LAST SPRING THE KAW CAME OVER THE RAILROAD LEDGE OVER THE LETTUCE AND RADISH AND CUCUMBER PLANTINGS OVER THE ROAD OVER THE HEAD OF HUNTER WHO SWAM MADLY IN A CIRCLE AROUND THE CAR WHICH THE RIVER WAS ALSO NEARLY OVER. HELEN JOANNE WADES PICKS HUNTER UP AND BRINGS HIM INTO THE HOUSE. HELEN JOANNE SAYS THAT ANIMALS SHOULD LIVE OUTSIDE BUT THIS WAS AN EXCEPTION. TO FIND YOUR WAY HOME THE RIVER MUST BE IN FRONT OF YOU. AT THE SLIDE YOU CANT SEE THE KAW. YOU LET YOURSELF RUN BACK AND FORTH AS IF LOST THE EXTRA ADRENALINE WILL PROPEL YOU TO THE TOP OF THE BLUFF. SUSIE HOLDS TO A SAPLING AS SHE LOWERS HERSELF TOWARD THE HOUSE. IT GIVES WAY AND SHE

SCRAPES HER LEG. YOU ARE CAREFUL TO HOLD TO A LARGER TRUNK.



YOU WATCH HELEN JOANNE WALK OUT THE BACK DOOR. THERE IS NO OTHER DOOR BUT YOU THINK THE DOOR IS NOT FORMAL ENOUGH TO CALL A FRONT DOOR. THE CAR IS PARKED FACING BONNER. HELEN JOANNE GETS IN THE CAR ALONE. USUALLY FIVE CHILDREN ARE FIGHTING FOR A SEAT BY THE WINDOW. HARVEY WALKS QUICKLY OUT OF THE HOUSE. THE ONLY OTHER TIME YOU HAVE SEEN HARVEY WALK QUICKLY WAS WHEN THE FIRE SET TO BURN OFF LAST YEARS HARVEST SPREAD TOO QUICKLY TOWARD THE ROAD BETWEEN THE HOUSE AND THE FIELD. HE IS FOLDING UP THE SLEEVES OF HIS WHITE SHIRT HIS SUNBURNED FOREARMS MEETING THE PALE WHITE OF HIS ELBOWS. HE PLACES HIMSELF IN FRONT OF THE CAR ARMS OUTSTRETCHED AND HIGH FINGERS TOGETHER THE SUN TO HIS BACK. HE SAYS WE CANNOT ALLOW YOU TO DRIVE OUTSIDE BONNER. HELEN JOANNE STARTS THE ENGINE. HARVEY WALKS TO THE DRIVERS WINDOW AND PUTS IN HIS HEAD. HE SAYS WE CANNOT ALLOW YOU TO... HELEN JOANNE MUST HAVE PUT HER FOOT TO THE

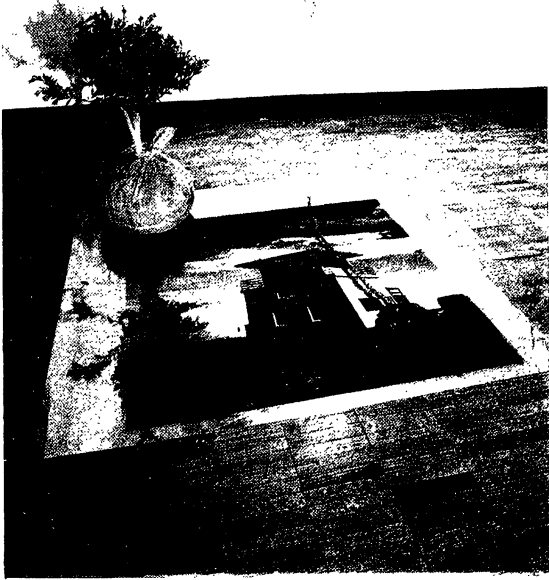
FLOOR. THE CAR TURNS A WIDE U FACES KANSAS CITY DIGS A SMOOTH PATCH INTO THE GRAVEL THROWS DUST ONTO HARVEY. HE YELLS BEHIND THE DUST THE CAR WE CANNOT APPROVE OF THIS. YOU STAND ON THE PORCH OFF THE BACK DOOR AND CHOP CABBAGE AND TOMATOES. YOU LOOK AT THE FIELD THROUGH THE SCREENING AND WONDER WHEN HUNTER WILL COME HOME. HELEN JOANNE RETURNS IN THE DARK. NO ONE SAYS SHE HAS BEEN TO THE HOSPITAL. NO ONE SAYS IN FRONT OF FIVE CHILDREN THAT JOHN THE FATHER HAS CANCER. HELEN JOANNE WALKS IN THE BACK DOOR SITS DOWN AT THE KITCHEN TABLE WHICH IS IN THE DINING ROOM BUT YOU DONT THINK ITS FANCY ENOUGH TO CALL A DINING ROOM TABLE DRINKS ICED TEA EATS COLE SLAW. YOU SPOON SOME OF THE CREAMY SAUCE FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE SERVING BOWL AND PUT IT ON HELEN JOANNES PLATE.



THE MEN OF THE CHURCH ARE MOVING THE HEDGE. THEIR FACES REFLECT THE RED THE YELLOW THE BLACK OF THE TORCHES FORMED FROM THE BRANCHES OF THE SAME HEDGE. THEIR BREATHING IS DEEP HOT IN UNISON. THEIR CLOTHING THEIR BODIES ARE SWALLOWED IN THE NIGHT. THE HEADS OF THEIR SHOVELS ARE VISIBLE AS LOAM AND BITS OF ROOT FLY BEHIND. THE MEN OF THE CHURCH HAVE ALREADY BEEN WORKING ALL DAY. THEY WEAR LONG SLEEVED SHIRTS TO KEEP WARM OR TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM THE BRANCHES YOU DO NOT KNOW WHICH. YOU LOOK FROM BEHIND THE WINDOW OF JOHN THE FATHERS BEDROOM. YOU PULL THE CURTAIN ONLY FAR ENOUGH ASIDE TO SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING BUT NOT ENOUGH TO LET IN THE LIGHT OF THE TORCHES. NO ONE SAYS THAT THE HEDGE CANNOT BE MOVED BY THE MAN WHO PLANTED IT. NO ONE SAYS THAT JOHN IS DYING. THE NEXT MORNING THE HEDGE SOME SIXTY FEET OF IT HAS BEEN MOVED BACK FROM THE PUBLIC LAND ONTO THE PRIVATE PROPERTY. THE ROAD WILL BE WIDENED. YOU PICK UP THE SMALL BRANCHES THAT DID NOT SURVIVE THE TRANSPLANTING. YOU BIND THEM TOGETHER. YOU CRAWL ON YOUR BELLY INTO THE SPACE BENEATH THE SIDE PORCH. HUNTER IS ALREADY THERE. YOU PLACE THE BOUND TWIGS IN A PILE WITH OTHER BRANCHES. YOU LAY YOUR BODY FULLY OVER THE BELLY OVER THE BACK OF HUNTER WHO IS LAYING ON HIS SIDE. YOUR MOUTH RESTS NEARLY IN THE DIRT. YOU ARE USED TO THE TASTE. YOU ARE NOT AFRAID TO SLEEP KNOWING THAT HUNTER WILL WAKE YOU FOR DINNER BEFORE HELEN JOANNE STARTS TO WORRY.

What follows are musings and notions concerning the creation and presentation of the performance and installation of *OK . . . So, I Still Believe in This*.

I have a great attachment to the land. Memories of Kansas are the touchstone by which I still measure the value of the place where I find myself. I hope in my art to create a sense of place for the viewer. "Place" is the knowledge and acceptance of the self in all its most powerful manifestations. In taking responsibility for creating a place for the viewer I accept the challenge of offering them my language, my writing. The performance of *OK . . . So, I Still Believe in This* [presented in an installation of the same name] offered for the viewer a visual decoding and illumination of the ideas behind my writing. The images of the land are a metaphor for language: the destruction of the land reads to me as the desecration of the ways in which we have agreed to communicate with one another as a people. In my performance text Helen Joanne is the mythic representation of The Land.



B . . . E . . . T . . . I . . . N . . . A . . .

Birch . . . Aspen . . . Holly . . . Yew . . . Ash . . . Silver Fir

The series of trees which correspond to the letters of my self-given name are taken from the letters of The Tree Alphabet as presented by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*. Names, my own and those presented in my writings hold the potential for the mythic manifestations of the one so named. Betina is a guarded name. Betina appears at moments of power, of decision, of the transformation of materials and language into art. Betina is the name of the one who held knowledge in her body and who as a child found a generous place for that knowledge in nature. Betina is the one who held the power of the trance and of the ordering of language on her fingertips.

As a child I would count on the tips of my fingers the number of syllables in each sentence spoken to me by an adult. It was my way of making order, of keeping the adult world within my control, my understanding. Language was rhythm. Language was visual. Language was black and white and spaces between letters and punctuation. Language was breath and pauses.

This belief in the ordering of the world through the energy of the body is absolutely critical to my artmaking. Energy moving from one arena to the other is physically manifest in my artwork. *OK . . . So, I Still Believe in This* presents 30" x 40" kodaliths held away from the wall and lit so as to create their own shadows, or resting on sheets of copper. In my use of the photographic form I insist upon having light move through the image toward the viewer. Five photographic images were used as iconic references easily recognized as Western American culture; Woman, Child, Road, Monument, and Man. But, the woman holds a gun, the child is atop a too-large horse, the road leads to wide open spaces which no longer exist, the monument looks out over we know not what and the man frames a scene which we cannot see for a movie camera which we can. I hope to make the viewer aware of the placement of their body in space and of time passing in the creation of image, of icon, of idea, of experience. The body is tool and receptor.

This process is alchemical in nature, not the alchemy of base metal to gold, but the transcendent alchemy of the human spirit. I explore this notion in relation to the work of Joseph Beuys. Beuys believed that the true aim behind the practice of alchemy was the transformation of the human being himself. There is transformation in the quiet smoulder which happens between artist/art object and viewer during and after the viewing of performance and/or installation. This belief reflects my own insistence on the power of the artist to transform information and materials to create meaning with the viewer.

As a child I was obsessed with Greek and Roman mythology and Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. Before the uniformed and quiet group of girls, of boys was walked up to church each school day I would hide away in the small school library. I read with fascination the story of a man and a woman who showed great generosity to the god Mercury and so were allowed upon death to live side-by-side on the river's bank as trees. I wondered what tree I would transform into upon my death. I read of the virgin hunter who when chased by hungry men and dogs called out to the gods and was transformed (again at the river's edge) into a tree. Whenever I saw a boy or a dog approaching I would cross the street. I marveled that the Greeks and Romans had found a way to transform the very notion of death into a belief in a continued life in the physical world as we know it.

OK . . . So, I Still Believe in This presents bundles of twigs transformed and protected by my careful and obsessive binding with copper wire. The copper is responsive to the heat of the body. It calls forth the transfer of electrical energy. Formally it is seductive, reflective, beautiful. The copper wire calls forth in me a longing that exists beyond language; a desire for comfort and order. For this installation I collected branches that were pruned in the Spring. My mind knows that the branches are cut away to strengthen the remaining plant. My body feels sympathy and pain when I see the raw cuts which remain. Pruned willow laid aside for refuse found a comfortable place in my palm as I walked near my home. Town landscaping crews talked with me as they placed maple branches aside. I arrived home in a car filled with rose cuttings covered with thorns.

An entire tree is toppled by the wind or by man. I stare at it: photograph the raw white surrounded by green or brown or black. It will heal I say to myself as I walk away. I want to take root and join in its healing process: I cannot. There are other places where I must put my energy. But my promise to the tree is that I will not forget. The tree speaks to me of what I feel for those individuals who are in my life no longer, who no longer have a physical presence on the earth.

I want to create contemporary relics of my relationship now to losses suffered as a child. In this way I feel connected to the photographic work of Roman Visniac. He seemed to define and record the longings of the self in relation to culture. Visniac recorded with a hidden camera a culture which was being exterminated. Visniac's very personal captioning of the photographs makes clear his physical and emotional connections. "This is the joy of life, I suppose, to remember the dead," he writes.

Simone Weil writes of the absence, the death, of a loved one. She states that the absence is real enough and is from now on that person's way of appearing in the world. I believe that *OK . . . So, I Still Believe in This* allows the absence to manifest itself in the world. I start with the longing and melancholy of emptiness and fill it with the action and power of the body determined by the intellect. I hope to express to others that they can do the same.

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a film by Godfrey Reggio
music by Philip Glass
cinematography by Ron Fricke

KOYANISQATSÍ