



Louise Ann Wilson,  
*Sites of Transformation: Applied and Socially Engaged Scenography in Rural Landscapes*

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by Harriet Carnevale

Louise Ann Wilson is a UK based transdisciplinary scenographer, performance artist and researcher. *Sites of Transformation* is the first publication devoted to her practice, where she primarily focuses on socially engaged and applied scenography in rural landscapes. The monograph, published by Methuen Drama, is intended for a public of Drama researchers. Although situated in the developing realm of expanded scenography, Wilson's work offers a unique perspective for studies on performance. In particular, her work intersects with three key fields of practice: site-specificity, mobility and land art. As a modus operandi, following consistent on-site research and consultation of scientific experts, the scenographer designs imagery-led walking-performances. These are intended as a means to overcome topical issues of human suffering such as terminal illness and bereavement, infertility and involuntary childlessness, immobility and memory. By connecting life-events to the landscape in the form of a walking performance, the context thus created bestows meaning and purpose on that specific landscape. The title *Sites of transformation* refers to this process, by which the participants reflect upon and redefine their relationship with difficult events.



The monograph describes the walking performances that took place between 2011 and 2021. These are presented in chronological order, a disposition that provides a clear trajectory of Wilson's artistic development. The first chapter offers the reader a theoretical backdrop against which to locate her work. In the same section, diverse artists and companies are summoned to illustrate the state of the art in which the scenographer operates. From the second chapter onwards, the book collects the walking performances that the artist created since the rupture of the duo wilson + wilson, whose programme consisted of making site-specific performance—moving participants across the city, through departments stores, into attics and cellars. With *Fissure* in 2011 begins Wilson's next artistic season, which eradicates the performance from the city and emplaces it in the rural landscape.

By her own admission, Wilson's practice is informed by Dorothy Wordsworth's writings (1771-1855), from which she draws a feminine material sublime in opposition to the canonical masculine transcendent sublime. Indeed, the literature of landscape and walking in the Romantic period had been predominantly male oriented, which meant the influence of women writers on Western landscape aesthetics went under-recognised until recent years. By rediscovering this neglected strand of the Romantic experience, Wilson seeks to empower a mode of engaging with the landscape that is "located, embodied, multi-sensory, socially engaged and has transformative outcomes" (34). In particular, it is from Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals* (written between 1800 and 1803) that Wilson extrapolated the seven scenographic principles that guide her current practice.

Wilson's walking performances can be of great interest for therapeutic landscape studies, and, more specifically, four titles closely target this area of research: *Fissure* (2011) deals with terminal illness and bereavement, *Warnscale* (2015) with infertility and involuntary childlessness, *Dorothy's Room* (2018) and *Women's Walks to Remember* (2018-19) with immobility. However, these last two performances do not involve major physical movement, the former being an installation inside Dorothy Wordsworth's room, and the latter being conceived as a signposted-imaginary journey for incapacitated people.

While the whole body of work described in *Sites of Transformation* is relevant to the ecocritical discourse, *Ghost Bird* (2012), *The Gathering* (2014) and *Mulliontide* (2016) present particularly strong elements that support this perspective. The dramaturgies relate to the diminishing population of hen harriers in Lancashire, to the reproductive cycles of 200 sheep in Wales, and to a landscape threatened by adverse-weather conditions in a coastal village in Cornwall, respectively. Not only do such narratives implement a posthumanist approach, but also the use of the Verfremdungseffekt and strategical moments of silence further nudges in the direction of a refashioning of the relationship between humans and the environment.

In the last chapter, dedicated to *Dorothy's Room* and *Women's Walks to Remember*, Wilson reflects on scenography in terms of a tool for building collective experiences: since it is "a visual, spatial and multisensory art form that transcends language, work made in this way can engage transient groupings or create temporary communities that come together to give a voice to a specific concern" (204). In this light, the style by which



Wilson applies scenographic principles demonstrates the quality of a practice that seeks to empower both the individual and the community towards a renewed sensibility.

To conclude, the monograph illustrates modes and outcomes of a practice that collates multiple techniques to cater for the healing of its people, appealing to drama therapists and performance researchers alike. By adopting methods and concepts from land art and performance art, the scenographer inevitably incorporates a perspective intrinsic to Contemporary Art studies. Moreover, the transdisciplinary quality of Wilson's practice, together with a renewed attention towards the natural environment, fosters scholarly discussion moving towards an ecocritical dimension. Considering this plethora of affinities, the monograph may also pertain to social science studies concerned with marginalised voices and communities. Non-specialists in extended scenography will nonetheless be able to navigate Wilson's artistic expertise thanks to the abundant citation of seminal theoretical works that she provides the reader with. Ultimately, *Sites of Transformation* offers a framework of thinking that encourages a multidisciplinary approach to exploring sensitive issues and transforming not only the individual but the whole community of participants.

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**Harriet Carnevale**

Università degli Studi di Milano

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4176-5752>

[harriet.carnevale@unimi.it](mailto:harriet.carnevale@unimi.it)