



*The Silence Is Twice as Fast Backwards* is a sound installation originally created for a specific site in the gardens of Sudeley Castle, near Winchcombe, in the UK. The title of the work was inspired by Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orphée*: "The silence is twice as fast backwards" is the first "coded" radio message that Orpheus hears while being taken home by car at the start of the film.

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The piece was commissioned for the annual contemporary art exhibition held for the past several years at Sudeley Castle, a 12th-century monument once belonging to Henry VIII whose chapel contains the tomb of his last wife. Each year, Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst and a guest curator – Elliot McDonald, in 2007 – invite a group of artists to create works related to the castle's history, architecture and grounds.

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Jane and Louise Wilson were asked to make an installation for a narrow corridor formed by centuries-old yew trees. For "such a dramatic setting" they decided to work exclusively with sound – "a sound that animated the site,"<sup>1</sup> a sound heard throughout its history. But as Jane Wilson explains, even though there is no film, the piece is still bound in film.

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At the time the work was being created, the town of Winchcombe was celebrating the thousand-year anniversary of its change of status from county to village. The parish church of St. Peter's, first mentioned in 1175, was commemorating the occasion with a three-hour ringing of its eight bells. Jane and Louise Wilson recorded the bell peal in its entirety, curious, Louise confides, to know and to hear "how such a peal could end."

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*The Silence Is Twice as Fast Backwards* is the Wilson sisters' second sound work. In the spring of 2004 they made an audio piece for *Shhh... Sounds in Space*, an exhibition held at London's Victoria and Albert Museum. Equipped with headphones,

visitors could listen to the artists' work *Body Drop* within the confines of the museum's Cast Court. For Sudeley, Jane and Louise Wilson felt the sound should be more expansive, more immersive: they wanted it to possess "a filmic quality," like their video installations – to be a "soundscape" that would animate the site and encourage movement through the tree-lined alley.

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"In making this installation we were specifically inspired by Auric's score for Cocteau's *Orphée*." The Wilson sisters stress this interest in the work of Georges Auric (1899–1983), a French composer who as well as his concert pieces wrote the music for a number of ballets and stage productions before embarking on film soundtracks in 1930, with his score for Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète*. In these early years of sound cinema, Auric was an innovator in his way of integrating music into the narrative, ultimately imbuing the whole dynamic of the film with a musical quality. In his soundtrack for Cocteau's *Orphée*, several transitional moments are signalled by the sound of a bell: when it is time for Orpheus to descend into the underworld, after his passage through the mirror, when the mailman arrives at the door – and when Eurydice dies.

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*Orphée* is also famous for the ingenuity of Cocteau's special effects, notably the use of reverse motion in the sequences when Orpheus dons the gloves that enable him to pass through the mirror, and the vibrating surface of water that simulates this passage – two simple but highly effective ways of marking the transition from reality to the world beyond.

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"Moments of transition appeal to us, from one state to another (as in hypnosis) or from one space to another." Such transitional moments were conjured by the physical installation of the audio piece in Sudeley's alley of yews, since the work was activated by the visitor's movement from one trigger point to the next.

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In developing their installation, the Wilson sisters decided to allow each bell to be heard separately. After working with one of the St. Peter's bell ringers on recording the individual tone of the church's eight bells, they assigned each tone to a different speaker. They then randomized the play order, so that it was impossible to predict where the next bell tone would come from, and each visit would produce its own unique score. Of the actual church performance, the two artists retained only the last twenty-eight seconds, with all eight speakers going full peal.

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In June 2008 *The Silence Is Twice as Fast Backwards* was presented at New York's 303 Gallery, accompanied by two series of photographs. In this version the speakers were hidden and the sound "floated" though the exhibition space. For the work's second reconfiguration, in the Musée's multimedia hall, the Wilson sisters have opted to exploit the theatricality of the auditorium's heavy stage curtains to evoke an alley into which visitors are drawn by the presence of a photographic diptych on the screen-wall. Viewers are encouraged to move into the space and enter the corridor in order to examine these "pastoral," light-pierced images – visual vestiges of the gardens at Sudeley that inspired the project.

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Louise Simard

<sup>1</sup> As told to Brian Sholis. See *Art Forum Online*, <http://artforum.com/words/id=20574> (accessed October 2009).

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## JANE AND LOUISE WILSON

Born in Newcastle, United Kingdom, in 1967.  
Live and work in London.

The sisters Jane and Louise Wilson are known for their multi-screen video installations (often accompanied by photographs), inspired by the sites they select to explore. *The Silence Is Twice as Fast Backwards* is their second audio work.

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After completing their MAs at Goldsmiths College in London (1990–1992), the sisters began their artistic career making films featuring themselves in states of experimental semi-consciousness – being hypnotized (*Hypnotic*, 1993) or under the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. In 1993 their work was shown at London’s Serpentine Gallery in the *Barclays Young Artist Awards* exhibition, where they earned first prize for their piece 8:30. In 1995 they were chosen to take part in the exhibitions *Young British Artists*, in London, and *The British Art Show*, in Edinburgh, and in the years that followed they participated in virtually all the international exhibitions devoted to the so-called Young British Artists.

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In 1995 Jane and Louise Wilson began working in spaces of particular symbolic significance, focusing on the impact of such sites on the public imagination. They explored historically charged architectural spaces, seeking to capture what they call the “psychology of the place” – a mixture of memory and emotion. Nineteen ninety-nine was a pivotal year: they were nominated for the Tate Gallery’s Turner Prize, selected to take part in the Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh, and invited to present a “solo” show at London’s Serpentine Gallery. For this, the Wilson sisters presented three large video installations (with photographs) shot in some of the most inaccessible places in Europe: for *Stasi City* (1997) it was the abandoned headquarters of the East German secret police in Berlin, for *Gamma* (1999) it was the former US military base at Greenham Common, in England, used to house cruise missiles during the Cold War – both places that continue to inspire fear, despite

being deserted – and for *Parliament (A Third House)*, specially commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery for the exhibition, it was the Houses of Parliament in London.

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Their exploration of the symbolism of these high-profile places has brought the Wilson sisters international recognition. For *Dreamtime* (2001) they visited key sites of the Russian space program – the vast Star City, just outside Moscow, and a former rocket launch site in Kazakhstan – while *Sealand* (2006) features the broken remains of the World War Two bunkers conceived by Hitler that litter the Atlantic coastline. In recent years the artists have shifted their interest to other types of space, less haunted by the idea of power and its paranoid excesses and more inspired by filmic references. *The Silence Is Twice as Fast Backwards* (2008) has links to Cocteau’s movie *Orphée*, while *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* (2009) is based on archival documents related to a project for a film by Stanley Kubrick that was never made.

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Notable among Jane and Louise Wilson’s recent exhibitions are *Sounding the Subject*, at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, 2007; *Out of Time*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006; and *A Free and Anonymous Monument*, organized by the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK, in 2003 and also shown at the Kunsthau in Bregenz, Austria, and at the Pori Art Museum, Finland, in 2004.

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**Photo** *The Silence Is Twice as Fast Backwards II*, 2008, C-print diptych, 1/4, 182.9 x 182.9 cm (each)  
Collection of the artists, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York  
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