

ARTFORUM

MAY 2006



John Pilson, *Rondori*, 2006, still from a color video, 6 minutes 39 seconds.

John Pilson

NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY

"You guys ready for some action?" It's a question that buzzes with edgy excitement, but when the "action" in question turns out to refer to a nightlong game of Dungeons and Dragons, it becomes abundantly clear that the five men who gather around a boardroom table in John Pilson's video *Wisdom and Charisma*, 2006, aren't about to launch into a bacchanal or a desperate fight to the death (though they might imagine them with the help of pencils, paper, and twelve-sided dice). Instead, the Dungeon Master leads them in a densely technical conversation in which alarming revelations such as "Your spies have told you that he's gating in demons from the Realms of Pandemonium" generally elicit nothing stronger than mild irritation.

The players each appear on separate monitors, and their status as individuals—even as they are immersed in a shared (albeit imaginary) experience—is thereby underscored. Pilson's videography appears mechanical, suggesting the disinterested focus of surveillance footage, while the scenario as a whole, with its classroomlike setting and focus on role-playing, has the feeling of an acting workshop. The discussion is unscripted, but advances according to a set of possibilities and expectations that are (at least to those taking part) clearly and strictly defined. This notion, that outwardly improvised exchanges always in fact proceed according to more or less coded or covert structural schemata, is common to all four works in "Coliseum," Pilson's third solo appearance at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.

If *Wisdom and Charisma* is reminiscent of a drama class or a rehearsal, *The London Cast*, 2005, makes the reference explicit. In this video, shown on a small inlaid monitor, seven actresses read extracts from the opening monologue of the film version of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992). The setting is informal—the participants lounge around a sofa, a six-pack and an empty wine bottle on the floor in front of them—but Mamet's speech is belligerently self-aggrandizing, and the extreme contrast is what strikes the viewer first. Additionally, Pilson has edited the performances so that they flow together into a continuous whole, which has the effect of also emphasizing differences in delivery and hints at the possibility that we might be witnessing an audition.

The projected video *Rondori*, 2006, also features a group of women, though the interaction here is entirely physical. On a single screen displaying three different partial views simultaneously, participants in the eponymous Aikido sparring exercise are shown attacking each other and defending themselves in the oddly decelerated manner of a rehearsal of a staged fight. Both parties in each exchange appear to know exactly what's coming, and the session, which is made to appear all the more dancelike and abstracted by the format of the

work, ends in smiles. The division of the screen in Pilson's work not only recalls a host of others, from Andy Warhol's *Lupe*, 1966, to Stan Douglas's *Win, Place or Show*, 1998, and Runa Islam's *Director's Cut (Fool for Love)*, 2001, but also allows for an unexpected, almost painterly, compositional verve.

Pilson also uses a triptych format—here three separate screens—in the show's longest and most complex video, *Sunday Scenario*, 2005. Again, a "spontaneous" conversation follows unwritten rules, which are in this case based on the encyclopedic sporting knowledge of three male friends. Isolated from one another physically (they inhabit an office, a forest clearing, and an ornate bedroom) but linked by a telephone line, the trio engages in a lengthy combination of reminiscence and debate illustrated by pop-up images of the personalities and places to which they refer. Here, as elsewhere in "Coliseum," Pilson sets aside the more overtly peculiar or comic scenarios of earlier projects such as *A la Claire Fontaine*, 2001, and *St. Denis*, 2003, focusing less on his subjects' relationships to the space around them and more on the ways in which they transcend that space—most often through language—to define their relationships with each other.

—Michael Wilson