

In/Out

Catherine Wood

In the first of his essays in *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O'Doherty describes the white-walled modernist gallery space as having, "some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory."¹ The studied blankness of the conventional exhibition space is, he writes, "in limbo between studio and living room, where the conventions of both meet on a carefully neutralised ground."² The role of the spectator within the white cube gallery, often figured as an idealised participant by artists and curators, is caricatured by O'Doherty as being, thus, endlessly 'obliging', in that "he balances, he tests, he is mystified, de-mystified. In time the spectator stumbles around between confusing roles: he is a cluster of motor reflexes..."³ O'Doherty goes on to describe the way in which the gallery installation shot, however, is usually presented devoid of human presence: without the spectator's bodily intrusion. Abstracting the space's scale, this kind of shot appeals to the notion of the beholder's 'eye' rather than their physical presence. A gap is thus identified between the artist or writer's idealised conception of the 'world' of the white cube as it is encountered by a viewer and its visual presentation in photography: two abstractions which rarely collide in a singular visual manifestation.

John Wood and Paul Harrison's collaborative works for video might be said to treat this gap as a rich seam to plunder. Inserting themselves into the space between these two abstractions, the artists literally 'inhabit' an image akin to a gallery installation shot, interacting with or manipulating simple objects - minimalist-style props, boxes or pieces of furniture - that are set out against a blank



Twenty-Six Drawing and Falling Things (2001)



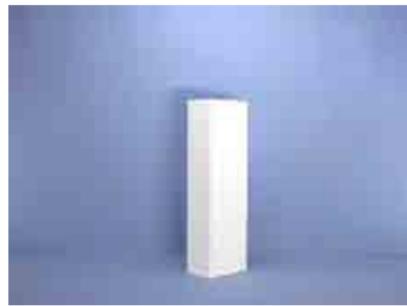
Boat (1995)

white backdrop. Usually displayed on television monitors, Wood and Harrison's video works complicate our own relation to the world they inhabit by effecting a conflation of the white cube's ideology as a 'neutral' space for perceptual experimentation, and the familiar appearance of contemporary television. The world presented by the artists appears thus as a kind of habitable minimalism, somewhere between the staged photographs of Robert Morris's 1971 participatory retrospective at the Tate Gallery and an advertisement for Ikea. Wood and Harrison's realisation of an inhabited environment does not have the early twentieth century utopian aspiration of, say, Aleksandr Rodchenko who designed everything from café tables and chairs, workers costumes to painted designs for walls in his attempt to aestheticise everyday experience. Rather, it is as though their practice reverses in backwards to connect everyday life with the gallery: the works appear as a curious form of fly-on-the-wall documentary exploring the peculiar ideological, often dryly comical, territory occupied by two men who appear to have volunteered to live inside the white cube.

Throughout their work, the artists carry themselves with a deadpan and heavy object-like-ness that parallels the actual objects they handle, bringing to mind Yvonne Rainer's philosophy of non-expressive, 'ordinary dance' at the Judson Theater in New York in the 1960s. Although Rainer cited Buster Keaton as a reference for her work then, Wood and Harrison make their connection to slapstick a central feature, their choice of the monitor format deliberately seems to invite us to view the pieces as 'entertainment' as much as it refers

to the closed-circuit video experiments recorded by artists such as Bruce Nauman in the 1970s. Board (1993), a work that recalls the constructed box in Robert Morris and Carolee Schneeman's 1964 performance, Site, and the comical improvisation of Charles Ray's Plank Piece 1973, is typical in offering us a straight camera shot into their white-walled set which frames the artists' manipulation of what appears to be a sheet of painted white MDF, or a piece of moveable wall. From this very ordinary object they generate a choreographic sequence that includes its use as a see-saw, a screen, a slide and - with characteristic humour - as the prop that should not be there in the classic pane-of-glass mime sequence. Elsewhere in the piece they manipulate the board as though it is a wall that they can turn around, as though the white cube space is folding in on itself, drawing attention to the theatrically constructed - rather than invisibly neutral - nature of the space they are in.

The performed actions, like the space which frames them, are always stylised: they are generated from schematic diagrams drawn in black ink on white paper and the formal qualities which prevail in their execution. I refer to 'reality TV', but it is important to stress that the vignettes that Wood and Harrison present are compressed or condensed versions of their experiences. The individual exercises involve real risk, real experimentation and challenge for the artists but they are always to some extent rehearsed and edited before being recorded, at which point they appear as a form of 'demo'. When we see the pieces installed the video sequences - usually no more than three minutes long - are looped so that they appear immanent rather than progressive, their actions remain in brackets without a 'before' or an 'after' to indicate their place in any broader narrative. Emblematic of the manner in which each action stands alone and yet fits into a non-sequential series, Wood and Harrison's work, *Twenty six (drawing and falling things)* (2004), is a kind of alphabet of performed experiments that are also recorded as drawings and short texts: as though the actions, like Karel Appel's futurist figure alphabet, might be ordered together to make some 'sense'. The piece includes actions titled *Watering Cans* in which a number of watering cans suspended above the artist suddenly tip green liquid onto the artist standing below, or *Table and Chairs* in which the two artists sit facing each other with their hands placed on a table. When they remove their hands the table is pulled upwards by two elastic ropes attached to the ceiling. Like earlier works such as *Boat* (1995) which involves the artists inhabiting a semi-circular vessel-like structure which they sit in and rock back and forth until it violently crashes over onto its flat side, or *Three legged* (1996) in which the artists have tied their left and right legs together as though they are taking part in the traditional school sports day '3-legged' race before they try to dodge tennis balls shot at them by an unseen adversary, all of these absurd actions are severed from the kind of explanatory narrative which would characterise a film by Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin. Like these films, the world of Wood and Harrison is severed from any connection to animal survival or a sense of the real threat of mortality. Because of this, the actions operate at the symbolic level, as hieroglyphs of sorts. Doubly framed by the white backdrop and the television monitor's edge the actions, in their isolation, take on an allegorical dimension



Six Boxes (1997)

which speaks of life experience in a manner that expands beyond the physical experience of the task in hand. Some of the actions appear almost as literalisations or puns on everyday phrases we use to talk about day-to-day occurrences such as 'running rings around him' or 'jumping through hoops', all of the looped sequences have a Sisyphean quality of fruitless but earnest endeavour, endlessly repeated.

Samuel Beckett has frequently been invoked as a reference point for Wood and Harrison's work, often specifically his most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*. But the mixture of co-dependent mutuality and antagonism in the relations presented between the two men has a complex symbiosis in common with the dynamic between the husband and wife, Willie and Winnie, of *Happy Days* (1961). Winnie's optimism that each day is "another heavenly day" and her declaration that Willie's devotedly listening presence reassures her of her own existence, allows her "to go on" has resonance with the silent complicity between the artists as they continue to repeat and invent the curious rituals of making, testing and failing that make the work touching and funny. Though sometimes they appear individually, Wood and Harrison's body of work exhibits a fascination with the double act and what it represents. The involvement of two performers immediately connotes communication and dialogue in a way that implies a connectedness to wider social relations, which is not the case with a solo artist's performance, as with the early video work that Rosalind Krauss analysed as 'narcissistically' confined to the artist, their studio and the camera. The duo perform for each other, to each other and yet inevitably struggle to maintain individual control which means working against each other. In this bracketed space at one remove from the implied wider sphere, each defines the others existence and both define the 'rules' of their world. This dynamic equilibrium of co-dependence is brilliantly exemplified in the piece titled *Six boxes* (1997) in which the set contraption, devised along principles similar to the funicular railway, signifies the position of the object as the symbolic, mediating link. Living in the white cube, the artists appear to be testing out and discovering the rules of its world by trial and error. Bypassing common sense logic, however, these are never quite what we expect. In *Door floor marking* from *Twenty six...* Paul Harrison opens a door into a white room. As he does so the door marks its angle of movement as a black section on the white floor. It becomes apparent that the entire floor is covered in white pigment and the door serves as 'windscreen wiper' across it. Peter Zorn, who has written a short text about this piece, suggests that "the transparency of the room is now manifested by its spoiled surface rather than through the figure changing position."⁴ I would suggest, however, that as with *Board*, it is the theatrical fakery of the pristine white cube space that is revealed, that revelation reveals the absurdity of their self-imposed limitations and their choice.

The artists' grandest and most recent single channel work, *The only other point* (2005) is a 14 minute sequence of situations for

camera involving objects in space. In a continuously panning camera shot that loops through some 24 generic 'concrete rooms', the film presents object choreographies familiar from earlier works in epic form. The piece begins with a mass of white balls blown into the corner of one of these rooms and progresses through scenes that show coloured balls that appear to be set out in a crate on the floor which, when raised, suspends them to sit neatly on a set of shelves; balls resting at the top of a corrugated roof that shoot down the drainpipe as though they are part of a game of pinball with an invisible player; a greenhouse evenly populated by more of the same balls and, near the end, suspended balls circulating in empty space. Though I use the word 'progression', here too, the piece is devoid of a sense of either narrative or causality. There is only surprise at the pleasing aesthetic order that keeps emerging, and at the persistence of the attempts: as though the succession of particular vignettes offer some kind of model for the wider universe, from the most fundamental cellular structures to mass choreography to planetary constellations

Wood and Harrison treat their constructed, white-cube world as a microcosm of the world-at-large, the schematic nature of their actions creating a miniature theatre of endeavour that links to the Shakespearean idea of the 'world as a stage'. But their experiments continuously exceed the politeness, the balance and poise and idealisation expected of the white cube space and its spectators, and in this the falls, knocks and spillages seen in their work continuously forge pathways connecting the unreal realm of art to real life. The 'double act' serves as a compacted version [or equivalent] of human relations everywhere. More specifically, though, the object-mediated exchanges speak about the generation of art dialogue itself. The works examine the extent to which the very language of art is about a 'conversation' or exchange of language, one that permits a succession of ping pong balls firing into a corner or several watering cans dripping water on their heads to carry meaning. Though the absurdity of Wood and Harrison's actions is easy to see, the schematic nature of their determined formal aesthetics make visible the everyday relevance of their endeavour.



The Only Other Point (2005)

1. Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space p.14, Brian O'Doherty, University of California Press, 1999

2. Ibid. p.76

3. Ibid, p.41

4. Twenty six (drawings and falling things) Picture This Moving Image, 2001