

These things happen

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There is a standard text on John Wood and Paul Harrison's work. It usually goes something like this:

Abbott & Costello, Bas Jan Ader, Bruce Nauman, Buster Keaton, Carl Andre, Chris Burden, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Edward Lear, Emile Cohl, Fischli & Weiss, Flaubert / Bouvard & Pécuchet, Frank Spencer, Fred Astaire, Gilbert & George, George Méliès, Hope & Crosby, J. G. Ballard, Jackson Pollock, Jacques Tati, John Cage, Keystone Cops, Kraftwerk, Laurel & Hardy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Monty Python, Morecambe & Wise, Paul Valéry, Robert Morris, Samuel Beckett / Estragon & Vladimir, Sol LeWitt, Stuart Brisley, Richard Serra, The Odd Couple, Vic Reeves & Bob Mortimer, Wilbur & Orville Wright, Yves Klein, Yvonne Rainer. The everyman deadpan slapstick double-act.

Then there is minimalism, action painting, performance art, comparisons with Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, DIY television shows, a nod towards MDF (their construction material of choice) and the occasional Ta-da! sound effect of a magician revealing a woman sawn in two.

There is a difference between 'artistic intention' and 'critical interpretation' and perhaps this role-call of double-acts and celebrated artists of the 1960's and '70's, art movements and childhood memories is an extreme example of it. The work of John Wood and Paul Harrison does not take as its subjects the characters of popular comedy, literary duos or art history.



Board (1996)



Device (1996)

Such responses to Wood and Harrison's videos make clear that there are a number of co-ordinates through which we might read their presentations of (often small) actions and (generally domestic) objects. These co-ordinates reveal as much about the (pop) cultural lexicons of the writers as they do about the work's actual content. Moreover, this list of antecedents, "influences", comparisons and analogies is testament to these videos' immediate plethora of access points. There is a peculiar ease then with which Wood and Harrison's work lends itself to writing - attested to no less than in the box set born from their multi-video piece *Twenty six (drawing and falling things)* (2001); twenty six separate videos comprised an installation; twenty six letters in the alphabet, so for the publication twenty six writers were asked to respond to one video each, the range and the registers of these texts varying wildly enough to prove a point and corrupt a lexicon while playing in its format.

My point, though, is that these videos are not in and of themselves even about interpretation. So if we can say Wood and Harrison's videos are like many things, but they are not those things in and of themselves, 'What are they then?' becomes the question, which begs a question in turn about whether we should be able to answer the first one.

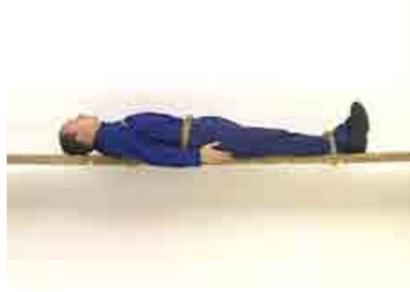
I am no different to those who have taken a comparative tack to describe this work. As such my own response would start with a comment about Yvonne Rainer - about how her practice as a

dancer radically redefined the field. This is exemplified by Rainer's short dance piece Trio A (first performed 1966), whose minimalist tendencies she famously annotated as the elimination (or minimising) of "illusionism" and "performance", "monumentality" and the "virtuosic feat", the "role of the artist's hand". Rainer substituted "task or tasklike activity" [sic] for "literalness", "energy" for "equality" and "'found' movement" for "factory fabrication". Rainer's notes could provide the beginning of a reading of Wood and Harrison's early work Board (1993) in which the two artists move from left to right across the video monitor screen in a choreographed, performative non-performance articulated around a set of orchestrated manoeuvres with a 8'x4' board. Wood and Harrison's 'dance' across the screen, visually echoes the space of the television set itself, their 'ordinary' actions, typically locked-off camera and (only generically) minimal mise-en-scène describing the permutating bisection of this space is like Rainer's erasure and re-inscription of the proscenium arch theatre.

Assuming some kind of cohesion, this simile very quickly unravels as a useful tool and I would need to start pointing out differences. In Board maybe it is illusionism in fact that informs its minimalist-looking strategies. The space we see is an imaginary echo of the monitor, it is not actually the monitor. One of the artists disappears behind the board which has become a wall to climb over, one of the artists holds the board upright on its shorter edge and lets it drop as the other takes exactly the number of paces in front of it to avoid being hit as the other lets it fall flat, a slam-dunk pun. In favour of the entertainment that variety provides, actions are not repeated. Board is not referencing Rainer but is a controlled commentary on 'dance' via anti-"dance" which renders discussing it in Rainer's terms redundant: a demonstration of all that redefines the functionalism of a non-dramatic prop as a game of possible usage.

So, to move from thinking about individual works in Wood and Harrison's oeuvre in relation to those similar things that inform our responses to them. Perhaps the cue comes from the opportunity that this publication itself provides - to think about the trajectory of their work as it describes itself, rather than discuss single works as accessible cultural amalgams. Board prefiguring the feat of Harry houdini (there's no escape that I can see) (1994) in its combination of controlled yet basic trickery and definition-bisection of the screen as a contained space. Board as a position that Wood and Harrison's works move away from, away from physical interaction or exploration of the body in relation to the human-scale object (as in Six boxes (lifesize) (1997), Shaft (1995), Headstand (1995)), towards the body as object in Volunteer (1998) or, even further, the invisible instigation of poles collapsing in the complex Hundredweight (2003): its explosions of colour and repeated, formal engagement of chance as balls fall across a floor, table legs leave traces of random motion, shelves collapse.

Works such as October 97 (1997) (or Device (1996), even) that consist of a series of videoed actions, provide a template of how the lexicon of this body of work might be read. That is, they



October 97 (1997)



October 97 (1997)

establish sets of rules as a misnomic structure - rules which are in fact unreliable and inconsistent. The works seem to suggest the operations of an internal logic, or formal (and stylistic) unities between separate actions whilst actually toying with the viewer's expectations of consistency.

October 97 redefines the principle of 'permutation' that Board establishes, its thirteen different actions which all seem similar, occurring in a similar space, are in actual fact just that - different: one of the artists is revealed, stood under a fluorescent strip as it flickers on; a mock slide show pastiches Muybridge in real time but shows only an upright artist in the gaps between movements, in stasis but also moving from left to right across the screen in stages. A "free-floating" bright green watering can magically rotates 360° around but away from one of the artists' head; a roll of paper is held aloft and unfurled to make a rectangle that obscures the person holding it. The person, then, has things done to him and instigates things happening to objects. The parts are equivalent but not the same, they do not provide the stylistic or physical rules of this operation. The final video in the sequence of October 97 makes difference most explicit, reflecting and modifying the sixth document in Six boxes (lifesize). In the final action of Six boxes... one of the artists makes a leap from the back corner of the white cube in an attempt to catch a ball suspended in mid-air. We see this leap through slow motion, then freeze frame: a video-induced suspension like the section in Device when one of the artists is literally suspended by ropes as he is manoeuvred from standing upright on a board into a static dive. Formally different from, though not disconnected to, the static 'movement' of the Muybridge pastiche and a pun on Yves Klein surely to be read as if the reference is their content? Maybe, maybe not.

The thirteenth action of October 97 is one of the artists sat on a chair that he is tilting, on the edge of stability, misusing it, about to topple until... another freeze frame and we are denied the conclusion of him falling. Losing the punchline and the art historical reference, we feel the shock of the formal yet naïve (like early pop promos) video trick in direct comparison to the principle of real-time recording that each of the previous actions have established - emphasising not just the difference between this final record and all of the others, but also posing the principle of difference through which we read what has come before. The body as an equal part and almost as arbitrary as a prop, or an art historical joke, one action as different from the next as a watering can is from a roll of paper. The body not about itself but about a demonstration that these things can happen in this medium, in a state of play: movement, incident, illusion. If there is a joke here then it is one more absurd than pure comedy, one that is already acknowledged by the shot in October 97 that sees nothing happen to the seated artist until an apple falls from the ceiling onto his head: and that this, despite all of their contraptions and set-ups to play against it, to render function through dysfunction or misuse, is a "joke" about gravity, ha, the joke of being alive. Being made aware that we are literally attached to this planet by an invisible force is both hysterically mundane and an irrefutable

principle made perverse in showing itself, being repeatedly observed. Gravity is absurd.

No wonder then that Wood and Harrison cannot help but also repeatedly turn themselves, or one turn the other, upside-down. No wonder then that this is developed through the body of their work as it intersects with the repeated appearance of an actual or abstract boat. Upside-down. It occurs literally in *Six boxes* (lifesize) (one of the artists is swung in a quarter-circle across the ceiling of a box and then lowered vertically, head first; October 97 (strapped to a horizontal pole, one of the artists is turned from face-up to face-down); *Headstand* (like a magic trick in which we see everything, a vertical box containing one of the artists is hinged, flipped over in halves so the artist is manoeuvred from standing to standing on his head); *Twenty six: Boat 2* (one of the artists is seen first sat upright, strapped into an adapted, white, stylised boat and turned upside-down and then second is seen climbing out of the hull as the boat repeats its turn). In *Volunteer* one of the artists is lowered into an increasingly narrow shaft inside a box, head first, echoed in *Twenty six: Lifejacket* as one of them slides down a diagonal shaft and is halted, stuck there by his inflating lifejacket. There are more instances than this list, not to mention those times when the camera itself is turned upside-down, obviously in *Upside down* (1998), illusionistically in *Harry houdini...*, more discreetly in shooting the whole of *Hundredweight* from above.

In *Boat* (1995) both artists are seen inside a 'D'-shaped box, like an abstracted hull in cross-section, the same shape that figures in *Device* (the same shape as a miniature solid that we see them balancing on in *Twenty six...Semi-Circle* and they rock and rock until the shape reaches its extreme position, like a fairground ride. A cut (another unity gone) and the hull falls from its curved to its flat side. In part this 'D'-shape performs geometry, the length of its curve exactly the length of the floor of the box which contains it and which it is designed to perfectly traverse and occupy. But it is also exemplary in describing an alternate set of conditions, an induced disorientation which replaces the simple demonstration of gravity with a complex one that is equally funny, ridiculous and revealing of the nature of things, action and laws. It is like the world and its objects playing themselves out on an unpredictable ocean, in fact if we imagine the world in which Wood and Harrison's actions occur not to be on land at all, but to be all at sea, in the bowels of a ship, on an on-deck platform, the peculiar panic of it making sense starts to occur. As such, this turning upside-down, this being all at sea is a metaphor that I tentatively extend to the work as whole. Precisely, it is a demonstration of the point at which motion induced by physical action takes over from its instigation, turns the tables, subjecting the perpetrators to the effect of physical movement which they began but have no control over. Maybe it is more like induced weightlessness, like the image of the two artists wobbling around on office chairs inside the back of a van which we never see in *Twenty six...'/Luton*.

Regardless, after all this, something basic feels revealed by Wood and Harrison's irregular patterns of inexhaustible, developed and developing engagement. Curiously, meaning accumulates but is not imposed, not in terms of intention, or application, not the system of a formalist lexicon but a basic law that is also unnameable, manifested through complex (brilliantly stupid) interaction, against the fog of normative usage, through the scrutiny and re-presentation, even, of the normal, the everyday - studied, isolated, plucked - phrased even: action and inaction, cause and effect, body and object. Life, huh. Like I say, these things happen.

1. Yvonne Rainer, 'A Quasi Survey of Some "Minimalist" Tendencies in the Quantatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A', first published Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1968), reproduced with an introduction in Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who...* (Baltimore & London, John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

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Twenty-Six Drawing and falling Things (2001)