

Answers to Questions

Toby Kamps

John Wood and Paul Harrison, a British collaborative duo, make single-channel videos, multipart video installations, prints, drawings, and sculptures that elegantly fuse advanced aesthetic research with existential comedy. ¹

The artists' spare, to-the-point works feature the actions of their own bodies, a wide variety of static and moving props, or combinations of both to illustrate the triumphs and tribulations of making art and having a life. In their not-always-successful experiments with movement and materials, many of which critic Tom Lubbock has described as "sculptural pratfalls," ²

Wood and Harrison employ exuberant invention, subtle slapstick, and a touch of lighthearted melancholy to reveal the inspiration and perspiration — as well as the occasional hint of desperation — behind all creative acts.

Wood (b. 1969) and Harrison (b. 1966) describe themselves as performance artists and sculptors whose audience is the video camera. They met in 1989 at the Bath College of Higher Education, where both received bachelor of fine arts degrees in painting, and have worked together since 1993. They share a studio in Wood's city of Bristol, to which Harrison commutes from his home in Birmingham.

In college, Wood, who made videos and Super 8 films based on "simple performances and Frank Sinatra songs," and Harrison,

who also made performances and diorama-like sculptures and installations incorporating "sugar cubes and model planes and boats," knew each other only in passing. After school, though, while Harrison was on a two-year residency at a private school in rural Uppingham, England, Wood, looking for fellowship with another young artist, invited himself for a number of visits to share the school's studio. After many casual conversations, they began a number of casual collaborations. The early performances were not especially significant, claims Harrison: "Just messing about in front of the video camera." ³ But they established a method for creative cooperation. Wood says: "Spending time together trying things out with a video camera and just experimenting — during this period of about eighteen months, we formed a basis of a vocabulary and an outline of what we were interested in doing, as well as a way of communicating and working together. And in the time we weren't together, we were doing drawings and posting them to each other." ⁴

The artists' easy rapport and genuine friendship have served as a foundation for a creative partnership based on physical trust (necessary when projects involve the risk of injury) and equal ownership of ideas and roles — although they both agree that Wood, the shorter and stockier of the two, is the better straight man and often cast him as such.

Each work begins with a simple drawing. In what Wood describes as a playful, "liberating process," they collect hundreds of concepts in sketchbooks and on scraps of paper. ⁵ The sources for these sketches — which often contain short, descriptive texts and notes on engineering and timing — are sometimes identifiable, as when Harrison saw a man swinging a plastic bag in a high arc at a bus stop, an action that recurred in the six-channel work *Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things)* (2001). But more often the catalyst for a work is their shared sensibility and sense of humor, rather than any particular object or event. "We have to spark each others' imaginations," says Harrison, recalling a recent trip to a costume shop during which he collected lists of rentable outfits. After a brief discussion of the store's space suits, they quickly workshopped the idea for a new work titled *Bored Astronauts on the Moon*. ⁶

The artists' long common history means that each has a clear idea of what the other will like, and their many multipart works are their most democratic products because once they agree on a structure, they take turns contributing ideas for component parts. *Device* (1996) is an early example of this tag-team approach. The single-channel video consists of the artists interacting with a variety of contraptions that Harrison describes as "built for the camera," meaning painstakingly constructed so that their shapes, spaces, and outlines align or harmonize with the lens's perspective. ⁷ Wood, stone-faced, crashes to the floor strapped to a mattress, "dives" in slow motion from a board suspended by a block and tackle, climbs a ramp wearing step-shaped wedges strapped to his shoes, ascends a shaft on an inflating plastic bag, and moves seamlessly from yoga's push-up-like "plank"



October 97 (1997)

to upward-facing “reverse plank” position with the help of a conveyor belt. In each vignette there is a momentary grace note, an instant of triumph or an elegant pose held for half a beat. Here the slightly nerdy artist becomes a superhero of the studio.

Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things) expands the format of Device, keeping the expressionless, nearly static performances but expanding the variety of the situations. The twenty-six short scenes in this work, which can be shown as a single-channel linear version or as six- or twenty-six-channel installations, feature the artists performing such aesthetic absurdities as opening a door in a white room and having the plank-like minimalist sculpture propped on the other side bonk them on the forehead, using a leaf blower to hold a large sheet of paper against a wall, and arresting a slide down a diagonal chute by inflating a life jacket. Notebook (2004) also continues the concept of cataloging ideas developed in unison but nearly eschews performance, keeping the artists’ actions to a bare minimum. The scenes are of Rube Goldbergian machines or scenarios set in motion by the artists’ hands or by nearly invisible fishing lines. A wooden match propping open a dictionary is ignited, causing a miniature conflagration that is extinguished when the match consumes itself and the book slams shut; a tilting rack tips tiny cans of red, yellow, and green paint onto a folding beach chair, creating a mini color-field painting à la Morris Louis (1912–1962) — or, to British eyes, re-creating a well-known 1970s deck chair design; and in an expertly timed, briefly seen *pièce de résistance*, Wood, seated in profile at a wooden table, uses a puff from a can of compressed air to roll a ping-pong ball off the far edge into a waiting cup. Ordinary things, the artists convincingly demonstrate, can be as expressive as ordinary humans. Wood and Harrison’s staging and filming, they insist, should always be “straightforward” and “undramatic.” They reject the dynamic camerawork and elaborate editing common in artists’ films today, employing a basic, do-it-yourself style that highlights their physical activities and constructions, the latter of which often include kinetic elements. Usually made with a fixed camera, their low-tech works contain no special effects or gimmicks other than occasional tracking shots and artful cuts or fade-ins and fade-outs that give the appearance of seamless movement.

The stripped-down visual and physical language that Wood and Harrison have developed harks back to the 1960s and the casual, bare-bones works of video art pioneers such as Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), Joan Jonas (b. 1936), and William Wegman (b. 1943), which focused on artists performing simple, often repetitive tasks in nondescript spaces. Nauman’s self-descriptively titled “studio exercises” from the late 1960s, in particular, are important precedents, both in their schematic form and in their art-interrogative nature. within it,” says Wood.¹⁰ Three-Legged (1997), a harrowing attempt to move in unison with legs tied together as in a three-legged race while a high-speed serving machine fires tennis balls at them, shows how the artistic partners learn, succeed, or fail together. Just before the machine runs out of balls, the exhausted pair discover that all



Notebook (2004)

they need to do to avoid getting badly beamed is duck.

In many of the works in which Wood and Harrison figure as protagonists, there is an element of archness — a tiny pregnant pause or twinkle in the eye — that signals self-awareness. In this sense, they are heirs to intensely physical American silent film comics Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and, of course, Laurel and Hardy, with whom they are often compared, as well as to the miniaturized merriments of vaudeville, which compressed the sophisticated and the broad. They also acknowledge a debt to a legacy of uniquely British television humor built on a national embrace of the silly and the uptight found in comedians like the eccentric Spike Milligan and the understated double act Morecambe and Wise, whose legendary send-up of pianist André Previn the artists are fond of citing as a kind of cracked manifesto. When Eric Morecambe attempts to play a Grieg piano concerto, Previn says, “You’re playing all the wrong notes!” Morecambe replies, “I’m playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.”¹¹

Since the 1970s a number of artists, predominantly male, have formed creative duos, often working in performance, installation, video, and other new media. The British pair of Gilbert and George is a common point of comparison for Wood and Harrison, perhaps because something of the former’s deadpan yet knowing spirit infuses the latter’s work. But Gilbert Proesch (b. 1943) and George Passmore (b. 1942) are more persona-based, making their lives and romantic partnership works of art by presenting themselves as “living sculptures” and protagonists in large-scale, photo-based symbolic images. In addition, Vitaly Komar (b. 1946) and Alex Melamid (b. 1945), originally dissident Soviet artists, use outrageous humor to travesty Socialist Realism; the Swiss team of Peter Fischli (b. 1952) and David Weiss (b. 1946) make low-key, comically conceptual sculptures and videos using commonplace materials; and Houston’s Art Guys — Mike Galbreth (b. 1956) and Jack Massing (b. 1959) — view human behavior as the final aesthetic frontier and make performances and objects that explode distinctions between art and life. Starting out, the artists were

Works like the photograph *Falling to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) and the video work *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968) were inspired by the artists’ existential thought: “[I]f I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art. [...] At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product.”⁸ This transformation — spinning doubt, stuckness, and other creative blocks into art — is the alchemy of Wood and Harrison’s work too.

Like Nauman and other predecessors, Wood and Harrison are influenced by theories of performance developed in the 1960s by dancers like Yvonne Rainer, who cultivated the idea that inspired amateurs, performing to the best of their abilities, were as valid as trained professionals. This inheritance, however, in the artists’ case, is more intuitive than studied, stemming at the beginning

of their careers from what Harrison calls “a suspicion of dance.” “Our early work Board [1993] was an attempt to understand dance. We’d seen a lot of dance while we were at college and thought, why do all these flourishes with your hands, when you could accomplish something just as powerful just by simply sitting down in a chair on stage? But of course we also were a little jealous of trained dancers’ skills. The central prop of our dance, the board, allowed us to do things that our bodies couldn’t do on their own.” 9

Board, Wood and Harrison’s most dance-like performance, documents the artists making dozens of interdependent, choreographed moves on and around a large sheet of particleboard, which they take turns holding and manipulating. The work highlights their unselfconscious athleticism and genius for unlocking unexpected permutations in materials and gestures. Similarly, another singlechannel video, Two Wall Sections (1998), uses no props in a simple pas de deux in two acts (the two “sections” of the work’s title) in which Harrison lifts Wood and holds him against a gallery wall, once right side up and once inverted — an act so reminiscent of picture hanging that one cannot but read it as an ironically literal expression of the idea of the artist becoming a work of art.

Early on, Wood and Harrison realized their physical limitations as performers and instead cultivated their own brand of anti-virtuosity based on skills like wit, ingenuity, and subterfuge, perhaps more commonly associated with visual than performing artists. “We try to make this perfect world with these little stupid things that happen aware of such trailblazing teams and looked to them as models for their collaborative partnership. Wood and Harrison are experts at marshaling materials and in the physics of everyday life. Their understanding of the foundational principles of minimal and conceptual art is equally evident in complex works such as 66.86 m (2004), a depiction of an elaborate grid composed of white and black rope and turning blocks that, after much pulling, eventually resolves into the outline of a chair. Their firm grasp of the obvious also is evident in a group of related prop-based works of 2007. Photocopier is a simple stop-action animation made by photographing the tray of a copying machine as it fills with sequential images of a sailboat moving across a horizon. Blind / Spot consists of an image of a black spot on a white field that, after a few shuddering seconds, reveals itself to be drawn in ever-larger scale on a procession of snapping and retracting roll-up shades (the titular “blinds”) so that, from the camera’s fixed point of view, it remains the same size. And Fan / Paper / Fan illustrates a feat of mundane prestidigitation in which a piece of paper is balanced on edge between two fans and dances suspended. Manifesting a concision simultaneously brilliant and lunatic, the artists always use the bare minimum of affect and materials to shape their ideas.

The simplicity and one-subject focus of One More Kilometre (2009), for example, makes it a humble heir to iconic conceptual works such as Walter De Maria’s (b. 1935) many sculptures that



66.86m (2004)



Space Wallpaper (2007)

give physical form to measurements, including Broken Kilometer (1979), made of sections of metal rod equaling one thousand meters, and the installation Vertical Earth Kilometer (1977), a one-thousand-meterlong buried metal rod. In this single-channel work, Harrison (we cannot see his face) applies a belt sander to a stack of sheets of paper whose combined length is one kilometer, creating a sinuous, undulating white wave as pages fly into the air.

The studied neutrality of their performance spaces, the spare geometries of their props, their recurring interest in grids and sequences, and a clear, illustrational quality in their work indicate that Wood and Harrison are steeped in the culture of reductive and idea-based art. As curator Catherine Wood points out, the artists in a sense reverse the age-old impulse of avant-garde artists to export their progressive aesthetics into everyday life. Wood and Harrison, she points out, appear to be two men who have volunteered to live inside the white cube — the sacred space of modern art. 12

The visual art world, however, is not the only well from which the artists draw their ideas. Mic / Amp (Apologies to Mr. Reich) (2007) references minimalist music. When Wood and Harrison discovered that the video’s central action, swinging a microphone from its cable in front of a speaker to produce a range of feedback sounds, had been the basis of composer Steve Reich’s (b. 1936) 1973 composition Pendulum Music (for Microphones, Amplifiers, Speakers and Performers), they acknowledged the overlap by appending a parenthetical apology to the title.

The history of film is another inspiration for Wood and Harrison. They admire the elegant staging and pacing of Jacques Tati’s 1967 film Playtime, a languidly paced, nearly dialogue-free physical comedy set in lobbies, apartments, and restaurants in high-modernist buildings. And the eight-minute tracking shot of a pileup of cars on a highway in Jean-Luc Godard’s film Weekend (1967) is the inspiration for the twenty-seven-minute Shelf (2007), a series of static and moving tableaux made from household hardware and toys arranged on a shelf, which are filmed and edited so that it appears as though the camera is moving along an endless shelf. As the lens moves serenely past them, these objects perform their own mini dramas: a tugboat sinks; a toy train hits a car straddling its tracks, pushing it to a waiting ambulance, police car, and tow truck; and a row of alarm clocks go off in succession, creating a cacophony of electronic chirps. Developing its own logical momentum as it progresses, Shelf suggests that everyday objects have lives of their own that need only be seen with fresh eyes to reveal themselves.

A love of low-tech special effects infuses all of Wood and Harrison’s work. Perhaps the most obvious example is the singlechannel video Space Wallpaper (2007). The central action of this simple fixed-camera work is the scrolling and unscrolling of a roll of cheap wallpaper emblazoned with stars, comets, and planets. Endearingly hokey, it re-creates the view from the bridge

of the Starship Enterprise with hardware-store technology.

Night and Day, a single-channel work of 2008, also uses rudimentary psychedelia — flashing lights — to create a panoply of stop-action effects. Demarcated and animated by flashes and extended periods of light and dark, the scenes depict an assortment of human and mechanical actions: a swing-arm desk lamp comes to life; arrays of hanging globe lamps rearrange themselves in patterns that recall Busby Berkeley's dance productions; and a Sputnik satellite rides a wire across the room. The video also features scenes of the artists doing the impossible: appearing to hover around a rotating ladder as they snap pictures with a stroboscopic flash; accomplishing skateboard stunts possible only through crude, jump-cut editing; and, in a non sequitur nonpareil, sword-fighting with their right and left hands as they stare blankly into the camera. A cracked compendium of Wood and Harrison's ideas and approaches, Night and Day also makes explicit some of their philosophy of art and of irony. The work opens with a shot of the artists stock still and emotionless in their customary dark pants and shirts and sweaters. Each time the lights blink on and off, a new subtitle appears paraphrasing the Gospel of Matthew on the nativity of Jesus: "They could hardly contain themselves. They were in the right place. They had arrived at the right time."

Written texts — descriptive, poetic, daydreaming — are central to several new works. They are the subject of a new series of 365 offset-printed posters, *Some Words, Some More Words* (2009). In them, plain capital letters set against dark blue backgrounds spell out self-reflexive rhetorical and artistic koans like "Two words / Four words," "One liner," "Good idea / Bad idea / No idea," and "Shut up / Do things." Like the famous "Think!" sign tacked to so many office bulletin boards, these broadsides — part motivational posters, part typically British piss-takings — suggest the guidelines for Wood and Harrison's creative process.

Words also permeate the mostly black-and-white animation *Of Knowing Where You Are* (2009), which the artists assembled from hundreds of individual digital JPEG images. Featuring texts by Wood and images by Harrison, the video, Harrison says, consists of "lists of instructions and thoughts on navigation and location, but it's also about standing around thinking about something else." 13

Patterns, drawings, and captions form and dissolve as the work progresses, suggesting a behind-the-eyes tour of the artists' consciousnesses or one of their sketchbooks come to life. This is, as one sequential text summarizes, "A film where nothing (much) happens / But not a boring one." The plays of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) are an oft-cited inspiration for Wood and Harrison's work. In his 1948 drama *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett places his two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, in a barren landscape, where they struggle desperately to fill the time as they wait for an acquaintance. Subtitled "A Tragicomedy in Two Acts," Beckett's play is widely considered a prime example of

Some words, Some more words (2009)

TWO
WORDS

FOUR
WORDS

GOOD IDEA

BAD IDEA

NO IDEA

SHUT
UP

DO
THINGS

1. This essay builds on the author's text of the same title published in *Answers to Questions: John Wood and Paul Harrison*, exhibition brochure (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, 2010), which accompanied the first, traveling version of the exhibition.
2. Tom Lubbock, *Independent Review*, May 13, 2003.
3. Paul Harrison, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 22, 2010.
4. John Wood, telephone conversation with the author, January 2010.
5. Paul Harrison, e-mail correspondence, December 22, 2010.
6. Paul Harrison, telephone conversation with the author, January 5, 2011.
7. Paul Harrison, telephone conversation with the author, December 16, 2010.
8. Bruce Nauman, in Ian Wallace and Russell Keziere, 'Bruce Nauman Interviewed', *Vanguard* (Canada): p. 8 (February 1979); p. 16, cited in Bruce Nauman, exhibition catalogue and catalogue raisonné (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), p. 22.
9. Paul Harrison, telephone conversation with the author, December 13, 2010.
10. John Wood, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 15, 2010.
11. See Eric Morecambe and André Previn in www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP8TUe993uo (accessed January 13, 2010).
12. Catherine Wood, 'In / Out', in 124 Minutes: John Wood and Paul Harrison, exhibition catalogue (Cardiff, Wales: Fotogallery, 2006), p. 12.
13. Paul Harrison, conversation, December 16, 2010.
14. John Wood, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 17, 2010.

the theater of the absurd, a genre defined by its cyclical action, resistance to resolution, and emphasis on the absurdity of life. And an aspect of Beckett's outlook — which is colored by existentialist philosophy — can be seen in Wood and Harrison's work.

Hundredweight (2003), a collection of thirty-six activities recorded from above in a ceilingless room. In *Hundredweight*, named for a passage from a children's book in the artists' studio library stating that the air in an average house weighs 112 pounds, or an imperial hundredweight, Wood is shut in an enclosed space where he performs a series of ridiculous artistic activities, including knocking over standing tubes to create a geometric composition, marching across a grid of floor panels that collapse under his weight, using a roller to paint a line around the room's perimeter, and pouring buckets of blue paint onto the floor, forming puddles that — suddenly, surprisingly — become white as they reflect overhead fluorescent lights. "We liked the idea that something that you aren't aware of, like air, actually weighs something," says Wood. "This mirrors the activities in the room, which might not seem important or real but do weigh something — things that appear as nothing are in fact sculptural, and there might be no such thing as an empty room." 14

Like Beckett's protagonists, Wood and Harrison may be stuck in the space in which they perform, but unlike the world of Vladimir and Estragon, it is one of their own creation and one that always offers an opportunity for revelation. Through their efforts — no matter how absurd, Sisyphean, or masochistic — Wood and Harrison reveal the inventive play behind all art, even its most ephemeral strains.

The creative sparks they throw off in their simple, self-effacing video works are the raw material of human culture. They trigger the small epiphanies and perspective shifts that make life worth living. Grounded in a reverence for the quotidian, Wood and Harrison's unique blend of the absurd and erudite, high and low, philosophical and funny, captures both a sense of wonder and the necessary thrill of risk and experimentation in art and life alike.

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