

Art in America

JOHN WOOD AND PAUL HARRISON

By Aoife Rosenmeyer, January 27, 2016 12:47pm



John Wood and Paul Harrison: *Erdkunde*, 2015, HD video, 16 minutes; at von Bartha.

Since 1993, British artists John Wood and Paul Harrison (b. 1969 and 1966, respectively) have been making collaborative work that searches for poetry in the prosaic. Their exhibition at von Bartha, “Some things are undesigned,” brought together around 50 recent sculptures, installations, films and drawings, providing an in-depth look at their practice, in which they reassess the everyday by means of simple interventions and dramatic staged scenarios.

Greeting visitors at the front of the gallery was *A Film about a City* (2015), which is not actually a film. It consists of tableaux of plywood architectural models—mostly monolithic buildings on sites with scant natural features—displayed on tables. In one scene, a church is surrounded by mirror-faced

buildings, while nearby an arched glass roof is conjured from a row of semicircular protractors. The sets are peopled with tiny plastic figures in odd configurations, such as a crowd of hundreds loitering around one small door, and an individual standing alone in an alcove in the middle of a long building facade. The mute dramas playing out in the cityscapes are disconcerting, suggesting a dystopian future.

Wood and Harrison's curiosity toward the world around them extends to mundane objects like park benches, construction tools and the L-signs (for "learner") displayed on student-driver cars—this last subject treated by the artists as a Concrete-style abstract motif. Significant events are rendered humorous. The film *13 Assassinations* (2013), for instance, makes murder slapstick. Harrison is pictured in a variety of casual poses before his white shirt is splattered time and again by exploding red paintballs. Conversely, significance is conferred on minor events. *I Fall Over* (2013) is a drawing on a yellow background depicting two iterations of the type of figure used in building or traffic signage; one is shown tumbling backward and the other forward, with the title written at the base. Common clumsiness is thus immortalized.

Another Wood and Harrison approach is to carry out marathons of pointless activities. A 2013 work, *90 Degrees*, began with a drawing in which 90 ruled lines fan out in increments of one degree from a corner of a rectangular sheet of paper; the activity was repeated three more times on three more sheets, from different corners, creating a full 360-degree representation and a record of hours of tedious labor.

Throughout their idiosyncratic work, the duo demonstrates Duchampian deadpan humor and adds even more nonsense, injecting human behavior into systematized environments. Perhaps the best example of this at von Bartha was the 16-minute film *Erdkunde* (Geography, 2015). It opens with Wood and Harrison sitting behind a table, ready to give a presentation. Through arrows they hold aloft, words appearing on a screen beside them, and their own gestures, the artists identify props they're using and actions they're carrying out. The camera zooms in on a film that begins playing on the nearby screen, and the action moves outdoors, where the artists appear again, indicating, through gestures and captions, a cloud, a tree, a spade, as well as more nebulous concepts, like those of angles and days of the week. A further sequence shows groups of objects, among which certain superlative ones, such as "the straightest" (of several ties) or "the most singular" (a single

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among an assortment of vinyl LPs), are pointed out. In works like *Erdkunde*, Harrison and Wood take literality to the point of absurdity, illustrating how language is often inadequate to the task of describing life.