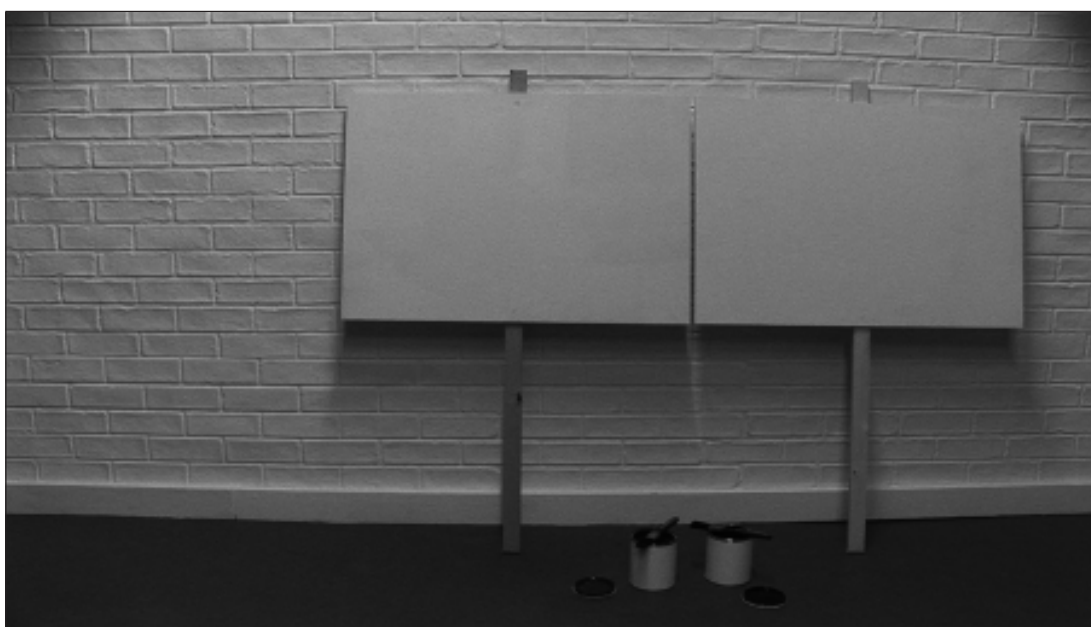


'WE ARE NOT DANCERS (OBVIOUSLY)'

Sarah Cunliffe on Wood and Harrison's undancerly video choreographies.



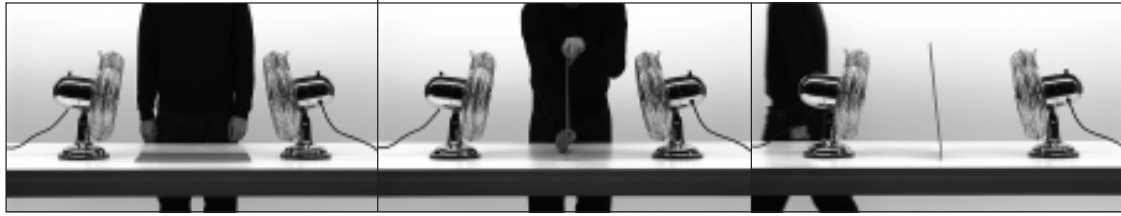
'Wood and Harrison's works are not documentations of performances, but rather single screen investigations in time and space. They are drawings. They are sculpture. They are paintings. They are theatre entirely without spectacle.' (Doherty, 2002)

Video artists John Wood and Paul Harrison have been collaborating since 1993 and, as Claire Doherty suggests, they draw on their fine art backgrounds to create formal compositions involving their bodies, objects and their relationships with space and perspective. Their work nevertheless provokes questions around presence and theatricality most often associated with dance and performance artists. One name that repeatedly draws comparisons is the post-modern dance artist and then filmmaker Yvonne Rainer¹. In 1966, Rainer wrote *A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or An Analysis of Trio A* which argued for the removal of the spectacular, extended, virtuosic features of dance and pro-

posed the substitution of 'energy equality and found movement', 'task or tasklike activity' and 'neutral performance'. These qualities are what brings forth comparisons to this pair; certainly their latest exhibition *From One Thing To Another* (Picture This, Bristol 2008) featuring six new video works, reinforces these ideas.

Another artist whose name reappears in discussions of their work is Bruce Nauman, who worked with the moving body in his video art from the late sixties onwards. As Nauman has stated, the process of working with abstracting everyday actions or situations and presenting them in a considered way is what links his work to the dance genre:

'...I guess I thought of what I was doing sort of as a dance because I was familiar with some of the things that Cunningham had done and some other dancers, where you can take any simple movement and make it into a dance, just by presenting it as a dance.'



I wasn't a dancer but I sort of thought if I took things that I didn't know how to do, but I was serious enough about them, then they would be taken serious.' (Nauman in interview with Lorraine Sciarra in Kraynak 2003:166)

The simplicity of movement adopted by both Rainer in her dances and Nauman in his video art, manifests itself in a pedestrian, minimalist functionality where a sense of the choreographic emerges out of methodically planned and executed tasks. The quality of movement that comes from everyday activity is something that has also featured in the early work of the duo, no matter how extreme these everyday activities actually became (for example *Device* (1996) and *Volunteer* (1998) where the body is pulled into performing by simple machines). Paul Harrison remembers them both going to see *The Cholmondeleys* and *The Featherstonehaughs* when studying in the 1980s and seeing in Lea Anderson's work something other than a 'dance' mode:

'...what appealed at the time with those groups was the directness and to a certain extent the 'non' dance or everydayness of it... I think we didn't 'get' dance, the quality of movement, the expression. We could appreciate it certainly, but it didn't interest us. When we showed our earliest videos to friends one or two of them said 'you should get dancers in. . .' but I think we wanted to present things anyone could do – and in certain cases we made devices which enabled you to perform physical acts that would be difficult for most people to do ('headstand' for example) – I love the way dancers stand and move but it removes you from everyday movement in some way (that could be a really great thing, but not for us), we don't have the bodies for it either...' (Paul Harrison)

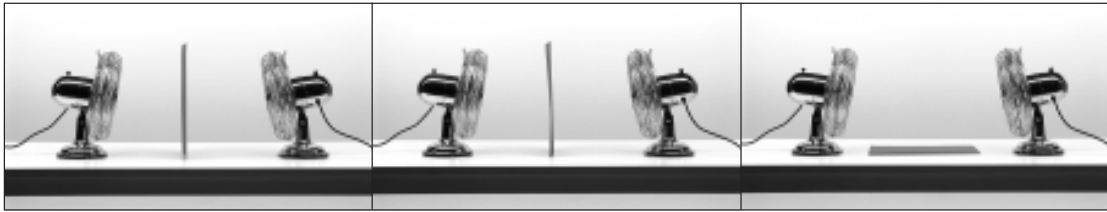
Although their bodies are not 'dance bodies', the bodies of Wood and Harrison with their intrinsic, natural restrictions, 'ordinary' capabilities and honest reactions, feature as compelling aspects of their works. Not only is it the type of movement that draws these comparisons to a certain aesthetic in dance, it is also the task-like process of generating movement that is a recognisable feature within choreographic practices.

'I think we move in the videos and we think of movement not choreography... We also only perform to camera, never live. In terms of process we rehearse, a lot, and we are concerned with trying to achieve a perfection of sorts in terms of the movement, so there are links there maybe.' (Paul Harrison)

Several of the new works were commissioned by Capture, the National Strategic Agency for Dance and the Moving Image. The central piece of the exhibition is *Night and Day* (2007), a 20 minute video work presented in a Perspex cube within the exhibition space. When Wood or Harrison appear on screen, either sat still on piles of chairs or poised having just miraculously 'caught' mounds of tennis balls, we are engaged with their presence, through their stillness and suggestion of movement. Although the crashing comedic sound of Harrison skateboarding into a wooden ramp is laugh-out-loud funny, and reminiscent of the slapstick elements in earlier works, it is the image that is not seen, (the actual crash), the invisible movement, that intrigues.

In another scene, piles of cardboard boxes are arranged into architectural structures and seen in their finalised, considered state but we are refused any glimpse of the architects themselves, leaving the viewer to imagine the pair in the space, comically arranging countless boxes in their various configurations.

'In the piece for Capture, which is built from 40-50 sections, we appear in some and not in



others (quite often when we do, we are static), we thought a lot about 'animating the space' - using the body or an object seemed interchangeable, whichever suited the section best.' (Paul Harrison)

In their earlier works, such as *3 Legged* (1996), a still camera captures the physical experiments of the duo, tied together attempting to escape the projectiles of a tennis ball firing machine. *Night and Day* however, sees the camera itself move. The architectural beauty of a chair, broom or angle-poised lamp, viewed against a wall or arcing over a table creates patterns of shadow and light, which as the camera pans, unfold gracefully and majestically. There is also a musicality to the work as the edits build rhythmically and light and sound patterns switch on and off in sequence. For all their apparent minimalist tendencies, the work of Wood and Harrison manages to draw viewers into experiences that evoke thoughts of the human condition through glimpses of mundanity and ordinariness, making manifest the everyday quirkiness of human existence.

As if attempting to brighten up a dull day at the office, the piece *Photocopier* (2007) films the regular monotony of paper sheets shooting out of a photocopier. As the rhythm builds, a small hand-drawn boat appears on the horizon and like an old-fashioned flicker book, the image of a boat crossing the sea is generated by this ordinary, mechanical and commonplace activity. In a similar vein, *Blind Spot* (2007) uses a roller blind to play with scale, shape and form as a black spot in the centre of a roller-blind remains the same size each time another blind retracts up to reveal the one positioned behind it. *Mic/Amp* (2007) is the largest projected image in the exhibition and faces the viewer upon entrance. The viewer assumes a position opposite the screen, dictated by suspended headphones, positioned at a low level. The sound of a microphone swinging past a large central amp is soon heard to correspond with the visuals and

the lesser the swing, the more discordant the sound becomes.

Whilst none of these three works feature Wood or Harrison in person, a human presence is felt due to the everyday functionality of the objects chosen, evoking a familiar spatiality and connectivity via common experience. As viewers, we are also aware of the mastery required to conjure and execute such witty 'object activities' and so their absence (or very recent presence) is made all the more apparent.

'We had worked with 'us' in the videos for several years when we set ourselves the challenge of making pieces without us being in them. But I think we are present in them to a certain extent, often we are just out of shot... I think the objects do operate in the same way and they replace us (often we deliberately use twos - identical objects).' (Paul Harrison)

The only other work in this exhibition that features the physical presence of the duo is *Fan/Paper/Fan* (2007). However, in this work, it is the fragility of the hovering paper itself trying to stay upright whilst stumbling and teetering that conjures a more significant engagement with the humanity of the piece (rather than the sight of one of them placing the paper upright in between two desktop fans).

A common question that can be heard at both live and film dance events across the country recently seems to be, 'where has all the dance gone?' It is a bold and refreshing choice by Capture, (*Night and Day*, *Fan/Paper/Fan* and *Mic/Amp* are their commissions) to support the work of Wood and Harrison as it recognises the breadth of scope for presenting work where bodies and movement are part of a work and where choreography in its widest sense is central. As Wood and Harrison gradually feature less and less in their works and as



they continue to play with the conventions of what we see and don't see, it is all the more intriguing to see how they might continue to create work that choreographs their absence in future works.

It is the manipulation of time and space, the choreography of the different works in the space that demands a heightened engagement with the exhibition as a whole. *From One Thing To Another* can be experienced as a symphony when viewed in this way, as elements such as planets or headphones generate episodic themes that become compositionally satisfying when recognised across different pieces within it. Most delightful, however are the child-like responses these works can generate. In *Space Wallpaper* (2007) a view of planet-patterned wallpaper, positioned at bedroom window-height, scrolled down the screen to a blank white empty screen and a young visitor's response was, 'It's the end of the world!'

This response reminds me of the beauty to be found in literalness and simplicity, in human scale, in energy equality and found movement and, of course, how delightfully human these features and attributes can be, something that I think perhaps dance in its more traditional manifestations, can sometimes overlook.

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From One Thing to Another by John Wood and Paul Harrison, presented 6 new works at the Picture This atelier space in Bristol 19th Jan-23rd Feb 2008 (Produced by Picture This). Quotes from Paul Harrison are taken from a conversation with the author.

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1 See White 2006 for a comprehensive list of artists most commonly linked to the duo.