

John Wood and Paul Harrison*Some words. Some more words.***8 April – 25 May 2009, Second Floor Galleries**

If the traditional view of an artist is that of a solitary figure in their studio, then the collaborative practices that have proliferated in recent contemporary art promote the idea of dialogue as a source of creation. John Wood (born 1969) and Paul Harrison (born 1966) have worked together since 1993. Their partnership epitomises collaboration as intrinsic to the process, both mutually supportive and antagonistic, a dynamic where one plus one equals much more than two.

Their work arises out of a curiosity with the world around them, as the outcomes of recurrent questioning: “What if we did this?” and “Why not?” Initial ideas take the form of experiments with objects or people – the artists themselves. These roles can even become blurred whereby in *Shelf* (2007) for example, presented in the Tower Room, inanimate objects become protagonists. Characteristically humour is derived from choreographed events, the artists, like the objects, subjected to assorted actions and tests. Sequences of exchanges could be construed as a form of play: both as a joyful activity without immediate outcome other than a thing in itself, and as a physical performance, for the camera.

The development of new work starts with sketches as a means to exchange ideas. While the final outcome may be a video, print, photograph or sculpture, the notion of drawing as a means of planning, mapping space or representation remains at the core of their practice. Here new series such as *Transition (clockwise)* or *Transition (squares)* (both 2009) are presented alongside videos for the first time.

Wood and Harrison’s practice often involves an engagement with the materiality of objects and the force of gravity, the phenomenon that shapes the way things – or us – stand and fall. In *The Only Other Point* (2005) the recurring motif of balls is used across a range of formats and representations. They are seen falling, tumbling out of containers or frozen in moments recalling associations from the history of the moving image, in particular Eadweard Muybridge’s early photographs capturing human and animal movement. Sometimes the balls appear as points of colour in space, like a children’s dot-to-dot illustrating book.

Such investigations of time and space are often shot in purpose-built environments – like the projection room for *Night and Day* (2008) in this exhibition – that could be compared to a laboratory. Their experimentation follows a pseudo-scientific method: the artists set the scene, define the starting point and control the conditions and parameters of action. Then, they set things in motion. Often chance can play a role in defining what actually happens; even when conditions are carefully controlled there is room for surprise.

Wood and Harrison's practice engages with notions of pictorial or cinematographic illusion, visual plays on frame, scale and perspective. That the viewer is not able to see what happens outside the picture evokes a series of ideas enabling a variety of tricks and magic to be suggested. In *Shelf* the impression of a parade of objects gliding in front of the viewer creates the sense of an endless continuum; likewise *1000 points* (2009) renders a splat of blue paint with machine gun rapidity, process and image intrinsically linked. This is also evident in modest sculptures – a Pritt Stick attached to the wall or metal staples hanging from a shelf.

The videos sometimes use the language of animation, the technique of showing successive still images to create an illusion of movement. *Photocopier* (2007) tells us a story while also revealing how the work is put together. *The Only Other Point* creates the illusion of a continuing architecture by using the movement of the camera across successive compartments. *Night and Day* takes full advantage of the juxtaposition of moving and still images, illusions created by editing as lights go on and off in a cellar-like room. In some events we see only parts of an action, our mind filling in the gaps. These situations resemble deadpan incidents from silent films such as those acted out by Buster Keaton. Episodes have a gravitas, a seriousness created by the absence of any outward emotion which becomes a source of pathos, a melancholic humour.

A recent development for the artists is the use of text, seen here in the new video *Of Knowing Where You Are* (2009), and poster-like prints. The exhibition takes its title from *Some words, some more words* (2009), the work eventually completed as 365 individual posters, each with a unique phrase and made in different colours. Like the objects in their videos, the words are at once symbolic, referring to a reality beyond the factual, and self-referential. For example, *Two Words, Four Words* describes its own physical make-up, four things. Text in *Of Knowing Where You Are* reads like subtitles from an unseen film; we travel in our imagination.

Wood and Harrison use art as a platform to subvert reason and the functionality of things, while retaining direct connections to everyday life. They play futility against utility, creating space for innovation.

