

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



Pennings, Mark W. (2008) Wilkins Hill and the Art of Hermeneutical Uncertainty.
Eyeline - Contemporary Visual Arts(66):pp. 30-34.

© Copyright 2008 Eyeline Publishing / QUT

Wilkins/Hill and the Art of Hermeneutical Uncertainty

“I would say that indeterminacy and loss of hierarchy is not necessarily a negative position ... I like the view of art as this no-way-out scenario continually shrugging of these readings from a position-less position.” – Wes Hill

Wendy Wilkins and Wes Hill's work fits easily into the Neo-Conceptual approach to art. Neo-Conceptualists are generally intellectual types who dispense with conventional markers like unique authorship, authentic expression and singular style. They opt instead for a post-medium melange of photography, sculpture, painting and moving image and combine this with a libertarian conceptual orientation. This tends to generate a chaotic multiplicity of images, objects, signs and styles that are appropriated from heterogeneous cultural sources. As a consequence, the Neo-Conceptual production of meaning in art can be complex, diffuse, precarious, protean and occasionally downright obscure!

Such conceptual peregrinations have been accompanied by expanding art institutional infrastructures and networks that have fostered a broader audience for contemporary practice. The whole shebang is managed by a global art system that is corporate in organization and outlook. Most artists abide by this 'system' and abide by the rituals aligned with legitimacy, authority, and interpretation; no matter how arbitrary these may be. One can't afford not to play this career game, for the art system's gatekeepers can provide access to cosmopolitan lifestyles, luxury product branding and financial rewards. Brisbane artists Wilkins and Hill have entered into this Art World and are undertaking the requisite training for admission into the hermetic guild of art industry professionals. They trained at Queensland University of Technology and have shown at independent, commercial and State-sanctioned art galleries and museums. They have also completed residencies and now live in Berlin where they are developing international dialogues with other players.

Negotiating the art world's labyrinths is an uncertain business and such experiences permeate Wilkins Hill's art. If there's anything that Wilkins Hill like to explore, it's the 'uncertainty principle'; for the range of installation works, photography, drawing and video they have produced since 2003 demonstrates a fascination for indeterminacy and heterogeneity. Like most self-respecting Neo-Conceptualists they refuse to fashion ideas and objects into syntheses that push a coherent line. On the contrary, their work is about contemporary art's systemic, material and conceptual irresolution, its intractability, and its adamant resistance to hermeneutical closure.

An interpretation of something often begins with the capacity to differentiate fact from fiction, and Wilkins Hill's early installation, "*Do You Remember the 12th of December*" (2003), set about undermining this criteria. They did this by employing the Mockumentary - a satirical genre that mimics the documentary form and its claims to veracity. The installation's content was derived from a telemovie about Art Cooley, a maniac who murdered one of John Lennon's managers. Wilkins Hill's version of the story was displayed on didactic plaques, but in their hands, Cooley became the producer/engineer and co-song writer on Lennon and Ono's Plastic Ono band 1970 LP record. The artists produced a bogus mock up of the reverse of the album cover with Cooley's name inserted into the credits. They also gave the narrative the imprimatur of 'truth' by using a series of mug shots and police photographs of crime scenes derived from the "True Crime" genre.

By concentrating on the fake, Wilkins Hill revealed much about how we understand truth. Those not aware of Lennon's biography would have accepted the deception as plausible and therefore became the victims of their own blind faith. The ensuing confusion between fact and fiction generated in such art is linked to a hermeneutical dilemma, which was symbolized by the artists' reference to Cooley as 'the bomb'. The bomb alluded to Cooley's threatening psychopathology, but the artists also produced a light board that stated: "Art is the Bomb". Therefore the artists used the unsettling and dangerous power of the bomb as a metaphor for the unpredictable nature of meaning in art as well as the weaknesses in art's authority and its claims to 'truth'.

If meaning in art is unpredictable so too are Art World gatekeepers like curators and critics who seem to make arbitrary decisions that can make or break an artist's career. Wilkins Hill engaged with this predicament in the subversive "*The True Meaning of Christmas*" (shown at the Institute for Modern Art, Brisbane in 2004). *Christmas* was an elaborate allegory that explored the speculative nature of meaning in art as well as the role of chance in building art careers. It contained dual video projections, whiteboard and wall drawings that conveyed information about a group of gamblers called CALMO. This obscure association relied on arcane methods to improve gambling odds. For instance, before a Black Jack game they hired a prostitute who showed them a series of large ESP cards (pasted with esoteric symbols) while in a semi-naked state. This half-arsed approach to telepathic instruction and memory enhancement was intended to help their chances of winning. CALMO also met in secret locations so awnings hanging in front of abandoned buildings indicated where these were, and they contained enigmatic messages like "Max Ernst Banners". The installation contained other absurd paraphernalia from the organization, including tips for horse race meetings, and a whiteboard illustrated with a Theosophical diagram that rated levels of spiritual achievement. Other vaguely necromantic objects were

available to people who would clearly leave no stone unturned in their quest to improve their chances of success.

As is customary with Wilkins Hill this sardonic work contained a mix of literal, allegorical, rhetorical and poetic systems referring to the lengths some may go to when climbing art's ladder of success. In 2004, Wilkins Hill were relatively new to the art scene and began to confront its mandarin career paths, forms of patronage, selection criteria, etc. This can be a daunting process given that the most talented artists don't necessarily get to the top, while some awful hacks do brilliantly. Consequently, it can be argued that *"The True Meaning of Christmas"* was produced by a couple of anxious acolytes trying to accurately decipher the messages emanating from art's power brokers. In the struggle to get things 'right' it seems they were willing to admit that the 'true meaning' of this sacred order continued to elude them, and that predicting things like - What is the 'secret' of those who make it? What club, organisation, dinner party elite does one join? - is like gambling on oracles. It seems that the artists made the humorous conclusion that negotiating success in the art scene is an imprecise and aleatory science, and one can only hope to place an each-way bet on the outcomes of its mysterious machinations.

The artists might offer some light-hearted commentary on Art World politics, but they also exploit a more fundamental insight when subtly contesting art's authority. This is related to their recognition of the limitations of interpretation and its hermeneutical ramifications. Hermeneutics focuses on the epistemological, linguistic, and ontological factors that influence interpretation. Philosophers like Gadamer and Heidegger suggested that interpretation was a subjective endeavour and that any 'correct' meaning was located in the subject rather than in the foundational, autonomous object of study. Critics claimed that these thinkers failed to establish parameters from which any sense of 'validity' could be established, and so could not posit a 'determinate meaning'. Derrida's deconstructive philosophy upped the ante considerably when he proposed that interpretation was actually a process of infinite play. This claim generated considerable uncertainty for it meant that a meaning was never 'final' and that reading becomes "... a 'transformational' activity and develops a multiplicity of interpretations from the fundamental polysemy inherent in both linguistic and non-linguistic signs." (Alan Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation. Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction New York/London* Routledge, 1990, p.7)

This rudimentary introduction to hermeneutical philosophy is relevant to Wilkins Hill's artistic strategies. Like Gadamer and Heidegger they reject the possibility of a 'determinate meaning', and seem to have great affinity for Derrida's idea that cultural forms have a fragmentary continuum of meaning. Wilkins Hill's perspective on such issues is clear: they are suspicious of claims for 'truth' because there is no hermeneutical certainty in aesthetic/cultural

production today. This is not surprising given the bewildering range of global cultural phenomena that artists have access to in our post-production and digital era. In addition, the translation of analogue forms into digital formats has given artists access to an unprecedented repository of cultural forms and practices. Under such conditions, the heterogeneous distribution and movement of multiple cultural modes indicates that meaning is caught up in a constant and bewildering realignment of cultural interpretations. This is in part why some Neo-Conceptual artists see the value of objects and forms in their conceptual motility, transferability and relations with broader cultural and ideological apparatuses, not in any intrinsic or inherent relation to finality or 'truth'.

"The Samboy International Challenge" (2005) sustained Wilkins Hill's interest in the flux of meaning and the elusive nature of truth. This baffling installation was created during the artists' residency at Kelleberrin, W.A. and consisted of drawings, a signpost, a green tent, and a video. As in *"Christmas"*, there were rune-like drawings of symbols that sat next to a sign that read "No Willie Nelson". The video inside the green tent played an loop of film credits that included stunt men with names like "Mike Smelly", "Mike Hardon" and "Adam Nuts". The purpose of the film credits was not made clear, and they were not accompanied by an actual film. The main game however involved a conceptual strategy that presented the viewer with a proliferation of scenarios. These offered open-ended networks of references, and operated in a way described by Claire Bishop, where there is a "conceptual mode of display in which each element serves as a referent to other systems. Images and words are condensed, displaced, and redistributed... [and] conventions of display are fragmented to allegorise visual and literal affinities". (Claire Bishop, *Artforum* 1/2007, p. 241)

Wilkins Hill's shenanigans are also reminiscent of Marcel Broodthaers' installations where the meaning of his objects and signifying systems remained suspended or teasingly incomplete. Wilkins Hill's neo-conceptual also approach sees the generation of art's meaning as part of a larger cultural complex. For them, the art object is always situated in the art situation/exhibition, the art world system, and a larger trans-cultural environment. Jean Baudrillard describes this kind of approach as ideological:

Art and the work of art are ... merely conceptual acting-out, a generator of deconstructed objects that deconstruct us in turn. Conceptual objects generated not by art itself, but by the idea of art ... No more judgement, pleasure or contemplation - one gets connected, absorbed, immersed, just as within force-fields or networks. Properly speaking, there is in all that no object anymore - just the idea of the object. And what we enjoy in it is not art itself, but merely the

idea of art. Thus we are no more in the space of forms, but in the space of ideology.” – Jean Baudrillard, “Integral Reality”, The European Graduate School,

<http://.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-integral-reality.html>

Wilkins Hill focus on the minutiae of meaning in art, its circulation, and the contexts of its hermeneutical reception. When we read a signpost that tells us there is “No Willie Nelson”, or a video that presents us with repetitious credit lists (with Bollywood soundtrack) we are directed away from questions pertaining to the meaning of the art object, and towards issues related to the ideology of contemporary art. In some ways, Wilkins Hill are like traffic cops who direct you to a detour that gets you lost... you don’t get back onto the main road, but instead find yourself in a completely different land with a new set of road rules. The artists recognise that art is not so preoccupied with the object as much as it is with the ideological expectation of what art is expected to be; and further, that art is not there to represent anything beyond art as much as to use that thing to represent art itself as part of a broader cultural condition. Art’s presence is also suggested by the ‘absence’ of certain elements - there are no linear narratives, no logical relationships between the various elements, and no autonomous resolution of art’s ontological status. These occlusions do not tell a conventional art story but do say something about what art is as a systemic and ideological phenomenon. Basically, Wilkins Hill’s neo-conceptual approach focuses on that space of ideology that constitutes the many objects and references that point to the many scenes that represent the entirety of the Art World and broader society. They think deeply about being artists in an enterprise called the ‘art scene’ and respond to the new status of art in the era of Super Capitalism, which has seen the extensive incorporation of art into a global consumer system.

In 2006 the artists produced “*The Plague of Inheritance*” (2006) for the “Primavera” exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, (a later version of which was shown at Black Lab Gallery in Brisbane in March 2007). “*Inheritance*” presented a confusing array of objects, including multiple flat-board sculptures of Bart Simpson (one of which explained the principles of intelligent design theory), and two monitors featuring a luxury spa in various states of filling up. The work was intended to be interactive, although there were few clues that indicated the logic and content of the show. Instead, the viewer was left to wander around and absorb or dismiss, rather than ‘interpret’ the esoteric elements.

Nonetheless, the show’s title did suggest a tenuous theme. “*Plague of Inheritance*” appeared to be an ironic statement about inheriting one’s parental defects. The reference to ‘Intelligent Design’ was satirical as it inferred that there is nothing intelligent about inheriting some of your parents’ physical ‘blessings’. The Bart Simpson sculptures came into play because these poorly rendered objects acted as inferior clones, or the imperfect offspring of the

original Simpson's cartoon character. Other structures played on optical illusions, mimicry and disguise. When viewed from a distance a collection of party photos displayed a bearded man who looked like Jesus Christ. This impression was confirmed by a text on another work, which was made by drawings of birds in flight that said 'Don't Accept Christ'. This latter command seemed to offer a critique of the Judeo-Christian version of creation.

At the Black Lab Gallery, the artists showed the paratactical video '*Steel Sculptures*'. It opened with an image of a person typing on a keyboard. The next scene showed a horror film projected on to the wall of someone's darkened bedroom. This was followed by footage of a cemetery. The camera then lingered on a pair of woman's shoes, which was followed by film of the Australian bush where the camera zoomed in on a plastic bottle bong that was wedged into a tree branch. The final scenes showed a girl staring intently into the camera while sitting on the seashore, upon which were superimposed some images of water; and lastly, there was an interior shot of a room with a bubbling spa bath. While watching the spa filling up, one tried to make sense of the video via a chain of metonymic associations: water – the spa –luxury? Continuing along this line: the typing might have alluded to 'story telling', like a horror film that was about death (the cemetery). The shoes seemed a complete anomaly, but the girl on the beach may have had something to do with water (and life?). Perhaps these images referred to the universal cycles of life and death that related to the plague of inheritance? Whatever the case, the viewer confronted a series of disparate images (like nouns), but there were no visual links (like syntactical conjunctions, adverbs, etc.) to help alleviate the interstitial nature of the narrative.

Wilkins Hill delay, suspend, and defer meaning because they take nothing for granted. Imagery is loaded up but not used in a directional way, and there's little prescription as to how to interpret the motifs. At such times, it's as if the artists retreat to a form of silence. Indeed, trying to 'read' Wilkins Hill's art almost makes the act of interpretation itself an insufficiency because the objects' meanings are tantalisingly random and evanescent, like Lacan's unconscious. As Reuben Keehan has pointed out, their work is "caught somewhere between referring to something specific and defying interpretation ... the work's aesthetic is loaded in its suggestion of meaning, yet the meaning resists a simple, definable explanation." (Reuben Keehan, "Radical Opacity", *Broadsheet*, Dec. 2006-Feb. 2007, Vol. 35, No. 4, p. 227) In this realm, Wilkins Hill adumbrate but do not define relationships between artists, artwork, audience, art world and social reality and so we are left with hermeneutical paradoxes.

The DVD called "*In Search of Peace*" (2006) encapsulates much of Wilkins Hill's attitude to art. The film shows someone trying to navigate a path through a forest at night with a torch. As the protagonist walks around in

confusing circles the random light flashes momentarily illuminate the surroundings. Text dialogues from the sitcom *Happy Days* accompany this image, as does a soundtrack, which is a distorted rendering of a 1980s pop song released by the character "Potsie" (Ansell Williams). The nocturnal search through the forest and the "Happy Days" screenplay makes for an incongruous pairing, an incompatibility aggravated by the fact that the same visual scene is aligned with ever changing dialogues. Misunderstandings thus accrue and are glibly encapsulated by lines that appear from the cheesy *Happy Days*, such as: "Richie: We played chess/Fonzie: You played with her chess?!?". We are also reminded of Wilkins Hill's love of the indeterminate in art for this work revels in the implausibility of establishing stable meaning. In analogical terms, trying to affix meaning to their art is like wandering around, lost in the dark with a flashlight in hand that occasionally illuminates one's surroundings but never provides enough information to form a coherent picture. Wilkins Hill only ever present us with flashes of illumination into the conceptual and institutional structures of their art, which is refracted through their take on the broader condition of art in contemporary culture.

Wilkins and Hill's art presents us with fluid, indeterminate and heterogeneous interpretative modes. They occasionally disclose a cynical view about the Art World system, but this is understandable given consumerism's substantive colonisation of art. The latter has contributed to the waning of aesthetic autonomy, and has thrown art into a state of confusion, especially in relation to what and how it is to communicate its role when this is so relentlessly instrumentalised for the entertainment industry. Perhaps this is why Wilkins Hill express themselves in such arcane ways for their obdurate hermeneutical orientation resists easy consumption and also leaves open the possibility of reconfiguring what Jacques Ranciere called the "distribution of sensible". Through these means the artists can restore some of art's radical edges.