

THREE

WORDS

PRINTED

JOHN WOOD AND PAUL HARRISON

something on the front of a building



JOHN WOOD AND PAUL HARRISON, 10 Signs for a Park, 2022

To restore silence is the role of objects.

Samuel Beckett, Molloy, 1915

The British artist duo John Wood and Paul Harrison have placed one or two things horizontally and vertically in the outdoor space in front of the Kestner Gesellschaft and developed a humorous tabula rasa of the everyday. For the exhibition *John Wood and Paul Harrison: something on the front of a building*, the new neon installation *words on the front of a building* (2023) was installed on the facade. In front of the building, in the park of the old St. Nikolai Cemetery, the duo placed the green park signs *10 Signs for a Park* (2022). The public sculptures are in direct dialogue with each other and show Wood and Harrison's ongoing engagement with the overwhelming universe of things, time and boredom, the sober language of everyday life, as well as the tragedy of metaphysical existence, and at the same time question the identity of the site.

How many words does it take on the facade of a building to learn something about its meaning and function in everyday life? What if the text only uselessly referred to its own linguistic content and thus to itself? *Words on the front of a building* deals with these questions and leaves much unclear regarding architecture as an object in public space. Wood and Harrison open up a humorous space for thought that makes the search for a relation between architecture and words

The duo's minimalist works involve bodies, things, and texts in performative settings in sculptures, installations, paintings, videos, drawings, neon works, and architectural models, exploring the relationships of unknown laws of chance, calculation, and failure as central elements of the parameters of life. In numerous (text) sculptures and video works, they have moved countless things with language and their bodies and refuted certainties about their use and classification as objects. Following a strict conceptual logic in most of their works, the actions described or shown are directly related to the duration of their works: the sequence of a performative body movement and displacement of objects in a seemingly logical world must not happen without an obvious reason and must be comprehensible to the viewer. In their videos, they often show simple actions and objects from everyday life. The visible spaces, as in *10x10* (2011), were constructed by the artists and interrogates the absurdity of corporeal actions and the despair at the automatism of everyday routines.

PLEASE DO NOT READ

John Wood and Paul Harrison, 2020

In their performative works, Wood and Harrison develop reference manuals with a logic of their own and at the same time absurd instructions for how things can be (but do not have to be) done, built, or disassembled. The experiment of compiling an index of the language of the everyday has been a hallmark of the duo since they began working together, with the essential ele-

WORDS ON THE FRONT OF A BUILDING

ment of their practice remaining hidden in the work process at first. Wood and Harrison have only recently begun to incorporate text and words into their works. The work *this is the painting I was telling you about* (2020), for example, ironically plays with the iconography of paintings as a painted text work by claiming to be a painting without fulfilling the viewer's expectations of a traditional painting. It adds a new semantic and ironic level to the "painting" on a visual and textual idea and ultimately exaggerates it to the point of absurdity.

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by John Wood and Paul Harrison, 2023

Paradox and Tautology

We have three main faults. The first is underestimating how many faults we have. The second is watching too much TV.

The third is making up annoying catchphrases. We have a lot. They are often stupid and stupidly unfunny, but they act as a kind of code or shorthand for a shared experience we want to reference.

"Break even, cover our costs, that's our business model!" is one of them. It's one that acknowledges both how terrible we are at business and also how, sadly, we would never have made it onto *The Apprentice*. We did warn you about our second fault.

"Nothing's ever easy" is another. The classic definition of insanity applies here. We have an idea, and no matter what it is, how complex or simple that idea is, we always underestimate what it will take to get that idea out of our heads and put it into the world.



JOHN WOOD AND PAUL HARRISON, Wall, 2021

"Pointing out things you already know" and "Stating the bleeding obvious" are two more. We use these a lot. Someone once told us our use of language veers towards the Anglo-Saxon (they should hear us in the studio), and I guess we feel more comfortable and less self-conscious using these phrases than the (admittedly correct) terms.

Humor

Humorous works, or in our case "mildly amusing works," as we like to refer to them, are funny. Despite numerous examples of terrible good comedians being terribly depressed, no one seems to take humor seriously. Although few people would admit it (there are exceptions), people like to see people suffer. Only when it comes to art, though (there are exceptions). And how could you possibly be suffering when you are laughing your head off? Not literally, though. That would really hurt. So often using humor is equated with a lack of depth or seriousness, when in fact (and quite obviously, really) you need to take things very seriously in order to make people laugh (or smile a bit).

Humor is a great "in" for an audience, especially in an art context. So when we use it (and we don't always use it), we're happy for that level of engagement. And once someone is engaged, then the other things (and there are other things, plenty of other things) can perhaps become the thing that engages.

Absurd

I'm trying to think of things that are not absurd in some way. Take anything out of its context, its routine, its history, and it can become kind of silly. Even things we have to do, like sleeping. Sleeping is kind of absurd. Let's go to a special room, a dark one, put on a little suit (or for those on mainland Europe, take everything off), and lie down and sort of lose consciousness for a bit. It's such a ridiculous thing to do. I mean, it's brilliant too, more and more brilliant the older one gets, but it's kind of odd behavior.

Anything an artist does, no matter how absurd they try to be, can't be more absurd than things that we all do, every day. Or night.

Farce and Slapstick

There is probably a formula, a mathematical equation, for working out how fear of physical damage increases in proportion to the amount of time you have spent on earth. John was 24 when we started working together, making videos in which we interacted with objects and sculptural environments. John is not 24 anymore. John was relatively fearless when we started working together. He is not anymore.

Everybody, with their body, explores the body-object relationship every day. It's part of what interests us and makes us want to explore it. It's common to us all, and that commonality creates a shared experience between us and the viewer. It's a way in, for everybody who is not us. I'm exploring the body-object relationship right now. Between my arse (US: ass) and a chair. We all know what it feels like when the body-object relationship stops relating properly. We also know what it is like to fear the relationship not relating properly. We have all fallen over, we have all feared falling over.

Anti-performance

"You should use dancers," people used to say when we first showed our earliest performance videos. They used to say it quite forcefully, in that way people have of saying things forcefully. Hunting you down at private viewings, just to let you know you did a wrong thing. It doesn't happen that often, in fact hardly ever. After all, people are nice on the whole. But when someone is coming over to tell you about your mistakes and how you can rectify them, you can kind of see it in their walk. It's a kind of "You did a wrong thing and I'm going to tell you about it" gait. It's a kind of performance.

Dancers always used to tell us not to use dancers.

Kafka

In 2023 everything is Kafkaesque, especially on Twitter. So I looked it up, on Google, just to see what they had to say about it, and the first result gave an example: "a Kafkaesque bureaucratic office."

To us, largely perhaps because we don't work in one, offices are kind of exotic spaces, in the same way, perhaps, that an artist's studio is exotic to people with proper jobs who work in offices. An artist's studio is not exotic. They tend to be a bit smelly and dusty and very cold, and they often contain artists. But they are spaces that encourage play and messing around.

We made a work a few years ago, in which a camera appears to track down an office block with 100 rooms. In each room there is a person, and each person (it's actually just me—the magic of cinema) is kind of having a little play, doing something to pass the time. It's really about how we, perhaps because of the restrictions placed upon us in certain environments, can't resist a little play, a tiny rebellion, a little kick.

Beckett

We've often talked about filming a version of *Waiting for Godot*. After all, all we'd really need is a tree, and even our meagre production budgets could stretch to that. Though probably not a big tree, because big trees are surprisingly expensive. Maybe we'd get a smallish tree and put it close to the camera. The magic of cinema.

But after 30 years of working together, we have never filmed a version of *Waiting for Godot*. We're still waiting. We did get the Beckett wrinkles, though, but without the cool hair.

Twoness

We are a two. We have two of things. We have two heads with two minds inside. One each. It's not one mega mind. Far from it. In fact, increasingly as we get older, it feels like we just have one and a half minds. Between us.

Rhetoric of Failure

Politicians really should go to art school, because one of the most important things you learn there is that you will make mistakes, you will fail, you will be wrong, you will be wrong an awful lot of the time. And you learn that this is an essential thing, a natural thing, a wonderful thing. So you might as well own up and

own the mistake, own the failure. "It was me! I fucked it up!" politicians should say, proudly. But they don't. And that's a shame.

The Everyday

Everyday stuff is kind of great. Too great, really. I often ask my students (when they have made something they think is great), "Is it as good as the moon?" More often than not it is not. In fact, it is always not. Because the moon wins every time.

It's a bit like when people go crazy over kites. I mean, some people go really wild over kites, and yeah, maybe there is something kind of cool about them. But airplanes.

Of course, we're not competing directly with the moon (or airplanes) when we make art. But it's always good to remember that these super brilliant things exist. Super brilliant things are



JOHN WOOD AND PAUL HARRISON, 10x10, 2011

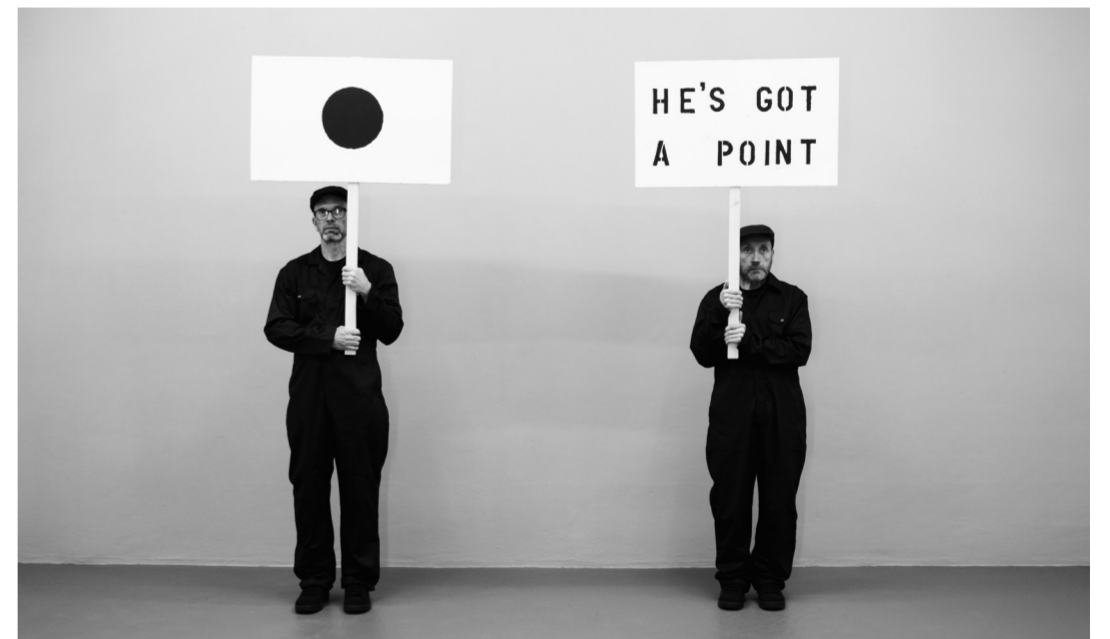
all around us, all of the time. So it's probably best not to get too carried away when you're making art. Art can be one of these brilliant things, super brilliant things. But the moon.

The Appropriation and Rituals of the Generic and Neo-Dada

We don't make ready-mades. Actually, I guess no one "makes" ready-mades, in the makey sense. But we do have a catchphrase (another one): "minimum effort, maximum return" (maybe we should make terrible motivational posters for offices). What's the least we can do here?

We love a standard, an A4 piece of paper, an 8 x 4 board. Art is simply about making decisions—sometimes, if you are very lucky, one decision, but often, unluckily, it's quite a few more. So we like to use the decisions other people have made, though sometimes through the work we question those decisions, but we're still grateful that other people have done some of the work for us.

That catchphrase, the one about effort and return, when we fail, and we fail often, it's the other way around.



JOHN WOOD AND PAUL HARRISON, Demo Tape, 2020

John Wood (b. 1969 Kowloon, Hong Kong) and Paul Harrison (b. 1966 Wolverhampton, UK) live and work in Bristol, UK. Both artists studied at Bath College of Higher Education and have been working together since 1993.

John Wood and Paul Harrison have had numerous international solo and group exhibitions at CAMH, Houston; Mori Art Museum, Birmingham; Frist Centre, Nashville; Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland; Ludwig Museum, Budapest; Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro; Whitechapel Gallery and Tate Britain, London; Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg; MoMA, New York; MUDAM, Luxembourg; OCAT Museum, Shanghai and ICC, Tokyo.

Curator
Alexander Wilmschen

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Alexander Wilmschen, John Wood and Paul Harrison

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Samuel Beckett, Molloy, 1915

We sincerely thank the artists and their gallery

Front Cover
John Wood and Paul Harrison, TREE WORDS PRINTED, 2023, cover design, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vera Cortés, Lisbon

Back Cover
John Wood and Paul Harrison, 10 Signs for a Park, 2022, Vinyl on powder coated aluminum, aluminum poles, 1800 x 840 mm, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vera Cortés, Lisbon

John Wood and Paul Harrison, Wall, 2021, Neon, 100 x 300 mm, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vera Cortés, Lisbon

John Wood and Paul Harrison, This is the painting I was telling you about, 2020, Oil on plywood panel, 910 x 610 mm, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vera Cortés, Lisbon

John Wood and Paul Harrison, 10x10, 2011, HD Video, single channel 15'37" min, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vera Cortés, Lisbon

John Wood and Paul Harrison, Demo Tape, 2020, 4K Video, 8'57" min, courtesy the artists and Galeria Vera Cortés, Lisbon