

# Profile

## ■ Walking the Plank

Gilda Williams on John Wood & Paul Harrison

Performance and sculpture formed a peculiar alliance in the 60s that generated a legacy that goes from Chris Burden to Vito Acconci, among others. The family resemblance between the two media now seems almost natural, and has a certain economy about it: the fleshy vulnerability of the body performs actions a sculpture cannot; sculpture assumes scales or postures too painful or humiliating for the human body to sustain. Bristol-based artists John Wood & Paul Harrison are part of this genealogy; with their work, the economy in the performance/sculpture equation is so extreme as to verge on the scientific. They call their sculptural video performances 'devices', suggesting a kind of machine-like utility that is close in character to three-dimensional models for some physics theory. The sculpture Wood & Harrison build to enact their bodily 'experiments' – contraptions for headstands, for flying, raising one's arm, climbing a ramp – are like the hokey constructions of old-fashioned science, before chaos theory and virtual anything, when it was all nuts and bolts, levers and chalkboards. The site of Wood & Harrison's weird science, however, their laboratory so to speak, is the video monitor.

All of their work is framed in space (the limits of the video screen) and time (each piece lasts as long as the action takes to complete, or until the body can endure it no longer), and this economy forms the crux to all of Wood & Harrison's pieces. Like conscientious scientists, they always see their experiments through to completion but do not waste any resources. *Back to Front*, 1996, lasts until the body, shifting position on a moving conveyor belt, cannot be stretched any further; *Upside Down*, 1994, runs the 45 seconds needed to turn the video camera 180°; *Headstand*, 1995, ends when a specially constructed, human-sized hinged box which houses an upright Paul Harrison, is bent and made to turn the performer on his head. Throughout, Wood & Harrison main-

tain an air of purpose and composure expected of earnest men of science, like a less self-conscious, less tailored version of Gilbert & George. Utilitarian sweat-shirts and jeans have taken the place of the grey suit or the labcoat. Their videos have what in music is known as 'corners': improvisation is excluded, the inevitability of the closing image is often given away in the work's very title (*Back to Front*; *Bridge*; *Freefall*). Meanwhile the screen determines the 'canvas', if you will, where the action will fit. In *Slope*, a diagonal is stretched across the two corners of the monitor as if it were a drawing; the artist, in blocky, triangular-shaped 'heels', climbs upward, as if wearing portable steps. With these and other 'devices', Wood & Harrison have somehow returned to the days of nutty inventions and flying machines, like Wilbur and Orville Wright performing backyard magic.

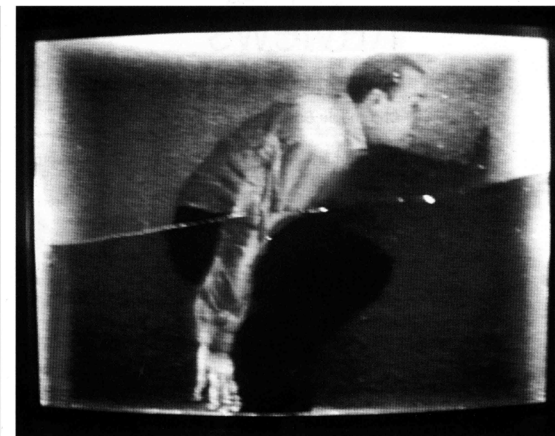
Take *Harry Houdini* (*There's no escape that I can see*), 1995, one of their more spectacular and imaginative manipulations of the video screen, which toys with that favourite staple of scientific experimentation, gravity. As the video begins, John Wood is like Schrödinger's cat, seated in an hermetically sealed box. The box is half-filled with cold water (so that Wood's legs are submerged, head and torso dry) and then is slowly rotated, along with the video camera. The surface of the water appears slowly to turn, unaffected by gravity, through 360°. Meanwhile the performer is forced to shift position round the box so as to remain breathing in the air pocket, his lower body constantly in the water. So simple and videogenic it is begging to be stolen for a washing machine ad, *Harry Houdini* ... fits the boxy TV set like those videos of fish you pop into the VCR for an instant aquarium. But the event is also threatening; the performer's concentration as he eyes that wall of water before him suggests a potential for drowning in this pint-size, spinning pool. Once again the scene fits the edges of the screen, the video lasts until the performer is returned to his original seated position: space and time are consumed by the action, and the experiment is a success. Science triumphs again!

But this a science tempered by humour; John Wood & Paul Harrison's Houdini-like acts never, ever inspire the question 'How do they do it?' Rather, it seems that they

are performed for the very purpose of disclosing the 'trick' behind them. They are, by their nature, acts of demystification, like living drawings. Other feats in their silent magic show include a disappearing act, in which one performer is seen climbing into a standing, coffin-like box, effectively vanishing (*Life-size Box*, 1995); or flying, as in *Dive*, 1996, where two very visible ropes are hooked to the performer's clothes and lift him heavily into a dive-position holding pattern; or *Freefall*, 1996, in which Wood is strapped to a thickly padded mattress which is allowed to fall from above, landing on the floor with a noisy thud and leaving the performer – ta dah! – unmiraculously unharmed. Like acrobats performing not only with a net but in a padded cell, Wood & Harrison paradoxically really *are* exposed to physical danger, but at the same time they are comical, like a slapstick duo. Alongside the Wright brothers analogy they are also like Abbott and Costello, with Harrison usually playing the straight guy and Wood getting most of the gags. Among their wittiest, most economical pieces is their 25-second *Volunteer*, wherein a string tied to Wood's wrist is attached to an unseen pulley on the ceiling; suddenly it lifts his arm up with a confident jerk, volunteering the reluctant performer to some task. The humour in *Volunteer* is undermined by a dark, risky side: in their cartoon world, these scientists are their own guinea pigs, and the untested pulley mechanism might yank his arm right out of its socket, Monty Python-style. Yet nothing dangerous or unpleasant is really going to happen, as so much of the work is about collaboration, the freedom of testing the simple mechanical limits of the human body, and trust.

Their 1996 video, *Untitled*, is more violent and louder than most of their work, almost suggesting a symbolic turn in their relationship and a kind of undercurrent of hostility. The set-up: a camera is fixed above Wood standing in a wading pool, 'walled alive' by a flimsy polystyrene wall. A deafening, wind-sucking noise suddenly shoots yellow balls: it's a tennis-ball machine, off-camera, violently slugging them out at Our Hero, who dodges them athletically as the thin wall between Man and Machine gradually collapses. *Untitled* quite literally (as a science friend pointed out) happens to re-enact a famous experiment in classical physics which, in determining whether light behaves as a particle or a wave, bombards a pierced wall with light, recording the pattern of 'light drawn on the back wall. The uncanny formal similarities aside, both 'experiments' have a shared sort of economy: both last only as long as strictly necessary (in the Wood & Harrison video, until the polystyrene wall disappears altogether and Wood is too exhausted to continue criss-crossing back and forth – defeated, so to speak; in physics, until the graph has been sufficiently plotted to visualise the theory). Similarly, the scene is like an execution which, like science, demands extreme economy of means: the firing squad provides the quickest, most reliable, most spectacular means of ensuring death. (The tennis-ball machine's murderous potential is also explored in J G Ballard's most recent novel *Cocaine Nights*, where the pounding of the balls covers the sound of real gunshots.) The performer never looks at the camera, which acts as an external witness, like the surveillance camera in a bank robbery, or like George Holliday filming Rodney King's beating: the cold 'objective' view, the clinical gaze.

Wood & Harrison's fascinating preparatory drawings for their imaginative performance work are step-by-step 'instructions' and diagrams which act like the mathematical equations behind the experiment. The drawings



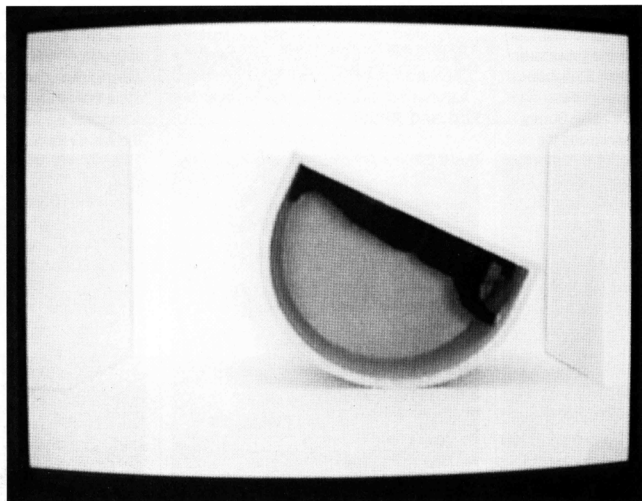
John Wood & Paul Harrison  
*Harry Houdini* (*There's no escape that I can see*) 1995

depict faceless, generic humanoid figures walking planks and hanging upside-down off pulleys, as if the stick-figure standing fearlessly on the doors to the men's toilets had suddenly chosen a career as a stunt man. Like those surrogate figures, the human presence in Wood & Harrison is of an extremely unpsychological variety – like the early 20th Century's ideal scientist, who suppressed emotion for the sake of his almighty pursuits. When those very solemn, scientific procedures are applied to silly stunts, those positivistic aspirations of 'objective reality' quite literally fall flat. As I accidentally watched *Freefall* in reverse, so that the performer ascended into heaven, flying off-camera on a square cloud provided by the mattress, it seemed a giant pun on the scientist-as-God ideal – as unlikely as the artist-as-God model of a few centuries ago. ■

John Wood & Paul Harrison are participating in 'Video Positive 97' Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool April 11 to May 18.

Gilda Williams is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

John Wood & Paul Harrison  
*Freefall* 1996



John Wood & Paul Harrison  
*Headstand* 1995