

*The final interview published by BOMB was poorly edited (not by Jared), so I am making this version public. The published interview can be read [here](#).

Andrew Norman Wilson might be best known for his 2011 multi-channel video *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, a firsthand account-cum-Marxist exposé of the human labor behind the Google Book Project. In this and other earlier projects, Wilson gained access to corporations' internal apparatuses and performed interventions that made their insidious organizing politics slightly more tangible. His more recent videos feature a cast of nonhuman proxies—a mosquito, a dinosaur baby, a scarecrow puppet, an oil pump—trapped in endlessly enthralling and alienating loops. On the occasion of Wilson's third solo exhibition at [DOCUMENT](#) in Chicago, where he's looking back to the labor history of Kodak Corporation, we spoke about his aesthetic strategies and how they work with and against the politics of art history, the art world, and the world at large.

—Jared Quinton

JQ: I notice a certain dialectic in your work. On one hand you're specific about corporate structures and other systems of organizing labor and production; you name them, you critique them, you even adopt their technologies. On the other hand you're invested in ambiguous narrative forms that seem more interested in affective, individual responses. I appreciate that setting this up as a binary might be a bit of a straw man, but can you talk about these different modes?

ANW: When I read that question I see two hands. One hand holds old work (a red pill imprinted with the word "tool") that is geared towards uncovering things that the phrase "the invisible hand of the market" is used to elide, such as offshore labor and offshore financial activity. Within this hand the hands of the nameless worker (becoming five sided fistagons or perhaps obsolete), as well as the keystroking fingers of the anonymous account executive (becoming increasingly abstract and also dispensable), are cast under the cold light of capitalist social realism in order to "identify and question the dominant economic, social, and political forces in our world today." Opportunistic curators go bonkers for this kind of affirmation of some nearly forgotten PDF they read during their MA. The hope was that the work was actually productive, in the sense that it didn't necessarily represent social processes, so much as it participates actively in these processes, and helps to constitute them.

But Laurence Fishburne came to me in a daydream and asked "What if I told you that even red pills still have to be consumed? What if I told you that the expectation that art will challenge one's expectations is still an expectation predicated on habitual fulfillment? What if I told you that the art world is a childproofed iPad play version of society for delusional incompetents that's monitored by horny, neglectful dads? And what if these horny, neglectful dads either constitute the 1%, or directly rely on that 1%, having installed financial closure into an unregulated cottage industry in the name of emancipated thought and action for a network of turgid charlatans driven by the obscene excesses it generates, performing cognitive templates programmed for novelty without difference in a demented pageant infected with strict behavioral codes: the enterprise private network, for which

every insider, at once crucial for growth yet entirely disposable, is a functional link within the compactly segmented mesh of mouths and rectums through which the artworld bootstraps itself - a feat achieved by a resourceful financial and cognitive algorithm against which fantasies of acceleration or slowing down and hypothetical escape or radical self-critique are exposed as simply variations in the rate of passage of hollow red pill capsules from body to body?"

"What?" I asked.

"If the content of most art to nonart people is 'I'm a loser,' Laurence explained, "the content of most art to art people is 'I'm a loser *wink emoji* get it? Heh."

Suddenly Laurence and I were seated at the Soho House New York, where a waiter served me the one meal that week that would exceed \$7 thanks to the "contra credit" I received for donating an artwork (depicting a nameless Google Books laborer's hand). As words like "Harvard" and "inBobbyKennedyIII'sHelicopter" and "hedgefundboys" rang out from the table next to us, Laurence handed me a pile of UBS business cards with my name on them and said "why don't you introduce yourself?"

JQ: And the other hand?

The other hand has a blue pill embedded under the skin of its palm, but science tells me that, like blood, the blue pill is red as well. It's just that blue is what makes it back to my eyes when passing through flesh.

So neither would get me closer to the truth, but this inaccessible red pill in the second hand implicitly acknowledges the illusory, deceptive qualities of not only art but also reality itself. I start to realize that there's more to life (and art) than a critical framework based on human economic relations, or any framework. There are invisible handjobs of the market, magician's hands, demon primate hands, and hands that make me uncertain as to whether they're gesturing or signing to me.

If we consider an actual pill being handed to an ordinary person by a pharmacist, the pill is more "real" to that pharmacist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a pharmaceutical scientist. And yet another stage is reached with that pharmaceutical scientist who is a specialist in that particular kind of pill. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing.

So I'm not so much invested in narrative as I am in how we create and operate through incomplete mental models—both scientific and cultural—for understanding the world. These models can include narratives. But if the newer work feels baroque, perhaps it's because illusion and sensory immersion here reduces the narrative conviction of familiar cause-effect structures, limiting them to pattern-making functions, or logics that unfold and

repeat across time. The old structure of causation in which the past causes changes in the present becomes the baroque “cause” which lies in the future. This is why I’ve been making infinite loop videos; themes of predestination proliferate, but there’s no concluding truth.

JQ: So perhaps it's more a question of resolution. In the curator-friendly work we know exactly what's being critiqued. This makes art viewers feel like they've done some good merely by becoming aware of a structural problem. But your recent video-installation work is more alienating. I think empathy is the enemy of good art, so I'm interested for you to talk a bit more about alienation and the other strategies you're using in infinite loop videos like *Ode to Seekers 12*, *Reality Models*, or *The Unthinkable Bygone*.

With those works I found myself at the beginning of something that I’m still pursuing - something like making a knot for viewers, including myself. If the knot works as I hope it does, it creates disturbances in the seemingly natural order of things and unwinds our counterfeit intuitions, allowing for thought to become an infinite drift outside of our established habits and perspectives.

Using and breaking techniques we have been conditioned to respond to from cinema and television - such as the embodied flight of an off-balance Steadicam, a transcendent crane into a computer generated character’s head, or the shifting perspectives of a multicam setup - creates opportunities for identification with nonhuman characters. These seemingly intelligent yet amoral characters - the baby dinosaur, the mosquito, the oil pump, the syringe, the puppet(s) - are anthropomorphised enough to offer a bridge for a human viewer, but also formally disturbed enough to cultivate the alienation you speak of.

Ultimately this is the way I feel a lot of the time - like I have to put on a strange human suit labeled “Norman” and refer to a script to fulfill societal expectations. It’s difficult to describe and that’s why the work is made instead of argued. I don’t want to say, for instance, that I’m violating intuitions of inside and outside, left and right, center and periphery - I want to make things that do that. Or more analogically, I feel as though I’ve gotten somewhere when the work makes me feel like I’ve landed in a new country, jet lagged, and odd looking light switches and plug sockets seem to emanate clownlike parodies of themselves with unseemly intimacy, mocking my incompetence. An uncanny state where things are strangely familiar and familiarly strange. A state where I realize the smooth functioning of things is merely an aesthetic effect to which I have grown accustomed to.

JQ: What are the political motivations behind this process of aesthetic problem solving?

I regularly worry about the devaluation of aesthetic problem solving, not just throughout general educational systems, but even within the art world, where a clickbait mentality seems to prevail that privileges consumables, virtue-signaling rhetorical stand-ins, and conceptual content designers instead of artists who take the time to process their material and how it might inhabit the world in ways that are unique to art. So in a form of very direct action, I’m contributing to a world that I want to live in.

While I wouldn't reduce the decisions I make to simply being politically motivated, there are ways in which those works complicate a humanist legacy—primarily European and male in its origin—that understands the world as having been given for our needs and created in our image. The processes of identification I've set up are meant to offer revisionary vantage points from which that stagnant legacy reveals itself as contradictory, amounting to an ecologically murderous, even suicidal tendency. But I don't know, can you imagine being a dog and thinking that your politics involve barking at literally everything?

JQ: So if I'm understanding correctly, the “intelligent yet amoral” characters in your videos are something like a posthuman. How does this relate to your more recent work, KODAK, which seems like something of a return to your more explicit interest in human labor and the production of imaging technologies?

600 million years ago, no one really did anything. The reason being that no one had any nerves. Without nerves, one can't move, or think, or process information of any kind. So everyone just had to kind of exist and wait wherever they were until death. But then came the jellyfish. The jellyfish was the first animal to figure out that nerves were an obvious advantage through the world's first nervous system—a nerve net. The jellyfish's nerve net allowed it to collect valuable information from the world around it—like the presence of objects, predators, or food—and pass that information along, through a big game of telephone, to all parts of its body. The ability to receive and process information meant that the jellyfish could actually react to changes in its environment in order to increase the odds of life going well, rather than just floating aimlessly and hoping for the best. Since then, flatworms, frogs, rodents, tree mammals, and hominids evolved, and a certain hominid named Shin Kubota, who is also a scientist, professional guest speaker, and songwriter, is obsessed with a certain jellyfish—the *Turritopsis dohrnii*—as a potential key to immortality and has made it his life's work to unlock that potential. So instead of dying, the jellyfish transforms back into a polyp and begins life anew.

This immortal jellyfish - both an ancestor from the deep past and a potential for a deep future - is scripted as the macguffin that a blind former Kodak employee pursues in the *Kodak* video. Like photographic film, the jellyfish's body offers a gelatin medium for information storage. Whether or not that's possible isn't what's at stake in the work - it's the protagonist's desire to preserve his consciousness and all of the memories it contains indefinitely on an analog medium. It seems that photographic film won't be so lucky, and the protagonist knows this. Throughout his pursuit he's haunted by memories based on photographic archives, but it is the 3D animation sequences, which start to appear in the third act and are narrativized as schizophrenic delusions, that fully derail his efforts.

Following the modern analog contingency of photography, a wholly constructed digital “realism” has emerged through which it seems we have returned to an even more deceptive version of the ideologically loaded tableau of Western historical painting. If during the 20th century we could hold some belief that a photograph is representative of a particular view in time, digital post-production and computer generated imagery have eradicated that potential. Now we can see whatever we want to see, or whatever someone else wants us to see, regardless of whether or not what is photorealistically rendered ever existed. Every

image becomes potentially baroque, overflowing with the results of endless discussions and deliberations, and therefore relies heavily on the known codes of memory and morality.

Regarding labor in the history of photographic art—from Hans Haacke to Martha Rosler to Allan Sekula—there is a dominant insistence that a photograph is meant to be looked at literally for the information contained within the document, whereby the literal creates the possibility for an oppositional alternative to whatever plagues ordinary life or aesthetics (most often some form of “the man” in their cases). What this kind of work encodes is a certain fantasy of escape—a long tradition of humanism that likes to think that it can step outside the circuits of commodification. Meanwhile, Google and Facebook are building a vast machine for converting every oppositional vector (of thought, action, posture, image... anything that leaves a trace of information) into a curve that bends right back to that very machine, a new input for a more personalized output. It does so not by making people stop having faith in opposition as a mode of critical thought, but by allowing, even encouraging that faith, a faith people can gather around in optimism or critical pessimism, even while it builds parallel forms of collectivity that turn all action, all stances, no matter how oppositional, into capital accumulation built from preferences, affinities, and likes. The belief that subjectivity is somehow foreign to those circuits is a humanist fantasy—at this point we *are* informational capital.