



**A Dual Presence*

Alice Wilson 2021

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1. zones of contradiction

Alice Wilson: I've been thinking about your ways of recording and looking, I've viewed your films for ages, your gaze is very present. I think I understood some of what you were showing me, there is a space between what you do and what the program does, then your hand is very much added in the video element, what is the program you use again?

Gil-Martin': The photogrammetry program is *Agisoft Metashape*².

AW: That intensity of looking, well recording, the ability of the programme to fill in gaps and map an object in this way is a little mind blowing. I've been engaged with this idea of framing, editing, remembering – all with this kind of premise of a constructed reality, how our minds fill in those blank spots, how we edit out what we don't want to see and maybe develop false memories in order to function. I worry my endeavours are obsolete. This virtual world which I've been hesitant of engaging with... I feel like you have just shown me to be one in the same.

G-M: What do you mean?

AW: I don't know! It's the connecting matter – what matters, what occupies the space, what's communicated as well as the physical matter. In the same way you are connecting matter(s), but it is the space in between... what's lost in translation or communicated through application. I'm not articulating myself. I'm interested in understanding 'things' in their own terms, sometimes making work can feel like a deception.

G-M: Have you heard of the term skeuomorphic? Things pretending to be something they're not, by taking on physical attributes of older things, attributes that were once necessary but are no longer needed. Like an electric kettle made to resemble a traditional hob top kettle. Is it this kind of nostalgia, romanticisation, deception... that you are concerned with?



Illusion is not the opposite of reality, 2017
44 x 24 x 24cm
vase, cake stand, photocopy



installation view *DOLPH* solo exhibition, 2017



installation view *ISLAND* solo exhibition, 2019



Image currently working with, 2020-21

AW: I'd not heard of that, it is an interesting analogy, yes maybe – it is this space of play, the conversation that happens between object and viewer and what we attach to that. I have been trying to think of this in terms of place and notions of home, so the relationship between object and viewer is also between viewer and place. I've got into the habit of describing my use of landscape as using landscape as a medium as opposed to subject matter, so the placement of a picturesque image of a landscape is there for the connotations it might infer in the viewer, as opposed to a record of place – (the place must remain subjective for the viewer), and, in some way, this relates to that use of the familiar that I guess skeuomorphic design plays upon. It is also an attempt to communicate my positionality in the making, being open with the making, whilst poking at the use of the familiar to frame an idea, it is a kind of paradox that in so doing, I hope to be able to break free from that.

Nietzsche (who was writing about 20 years after you) was very aware of this and drew attention to the detrimental effect that dialectical oppositions played in determining the understanding of one over the other, I am deeply intrigued by the possibility of this. How can you understand good without understanding it in terms of bad... skeuomorphic design and my artwork relies on that prior knowledge, relies on the familiar, what if it didn't? How could it not?

2. table

G-M: Well it looks here like you've made a table, or are you deceiving me?

AW: Ha ha, yes! This is a table, amongst other things, it's very recent, I think I made it to formalise the end of a work. The construction timber that it's made from came from another work, *Goat Moth*³ which I made on site in a forest in Denmark in 2018. The work went through several permutations, it travelled back to London where I've exhibited it twice, I thought it could hold its own in any setting, it couldn't. I've cut and shaped it into a table to make it impossible for me to be tempted to show the work again.

G-M: So instead of trying to preserve your work for the future you have saved the conservationists a job and made a very nice studio table in the process! I quite like that. How had you constructed the work previously? I'm intrigued by the physical nature of the work and also in general how different artists approach the making process.

AW: In the forest I'd used the landscape, making the work on the side of a hill and then pushing it upright from there, or balancing on a tree until I couldn't get the structure any higher. I think quite often with work, I am always trying to push what I can physically do by myself. I'd planned to learn more about fabrication and using the expertise of others this year, but it turns out it's been a more isolating time than before and I'm very happy to be able to make what I need to, part of the process is the problem solving, how can I make something work, what materials do I need and what are their limits, what are my limits...

G-M: It almost feels like an element of performance, it is clear that you are very present in the making. You said this was the end of a work, in so doing haven't you made a new one? Would you show the table?





Image of an Enzo Mari table from *Proposta Per Un'Autoprogettazione* (Mari, 1974)

AW: I don't think I can, I really don't know how it could communicate what it is? I'm interested in Daniel Buren's (1970)⁴ ideas on the artist's studio, he proposes that the one place an artwork can be truly understood and yet the one place an artwork is rarely if ever considered is in the studio or more loosely the studio environment. I don't think this is necessarily true, but in the instance of this table it really resonates.

G-M: It's in every mark, touch, screw hole. I think I mentioned object itineraries⁵ when we last met. The different directions through which this can communicate its journey is evident. The muck, the form. But now you have given it function.

AW: Sure. Its record of form and site moves through to its facilitation of its own knowledge and its ongoing use as a table. I worry that it is just for me, an indulgence, how much context would I need to give it? Outside of the studio I fear it becomes impotent.

There are other issues too, if you put this in the gallery with objects on, it becomes *The Last Supper*, or maybe takes the viewer to Enzo Mari. It's like a syllogism, two very rational assumptions may potentially result in a wayward conclusion.



Casts on table in studio

G-M: You could use it as a platform for objects? These casts feel very happy on there.

AW: The casts I am happy with, but not on the table! It has been a real learning curve this work *Goat Moth*, what makes something site specific and what makes it site responsive, I'd described *Goat Moth* as site responsive, maybe it was me as the artist responding poorly to future sites or maybe it turns out it was site specific all along. Miwon Kwon (2003)⁶ identifies the origin of a change in the social consideration of public sculpture to Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*. Prior to *Tilted Arc*, sculptors, predominantly men, and a select few at that, placed their work with no consideration to the social context of location, and the work was understood as thus, the artists' vision, their craft and skill laid bare to marvel at. My craft is more aligned with that of Monster Chetwynd who describes her work as 'impatiently made'⁷ I feel it would be a further obfuscation for these casts to sit on the table.

3. logs



AW: The casts are kind of working towards sculptures, but it's also been a negotiation of what to develop with the wood that I have. Quite often I have materials in my studio that I know I want, it's as if they have that kind of punctum that Barthes talks about in the photograph. Can a material have that?

G-M: I get what you're saying, it's that something that pricks you, that you can't quite put your finger on,⁸ (I think I'm paraphrasing Barthes) but I think he was referring to this in terms of the viewer as opposed to the maker, you are a maker ready to manipulate, the punctum is already there?

AW: I guess! As opposed to being pricked there's something there that I want to poke, use, manipulate. I'd been using the logs as plinths for other works, then I kind of turned them into formal plinths with plaster cast surfaces. But I don't know if they're plinths, maybe they are surfaces that things can go on, or not. There's a kind of structural manipulation, it's like a process of adapting the form to make it function or just to utilise it in an appropriate way.

The house casts are simplified, I don't know what came first, the 2D absent house works or the cast tree houses, one informs the other; in this instance I feel comfortable about these existing in a space together, because I am confident they are ok on their own. Balance is important, the weight of things really plays a massive role. The problem solving and development of each element has been a process. I am always going back to Jane Bennet's book *Vibrant Matter*— if the logs are not my punctum could they be actants?



G-M: How are you defining actant?

AW: I'm using Jane Bennet using Latour;

Latour defines it as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general." An actant is neither an object or a subject but an "intervener", akin to the Deleuzian "quasi-causal operator". An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalysing an event.⁹ (Bennet, 2010)

G-M: Well in a way yes, but not because they are logs with special powers, they are actants for their use and for your presentation of them and for your engagement with them, these logs are not magic. I know you've said you're not really on board with *object-oriented ontology*¹⁰ but there's relevance to be found for sure.



AW: I think I like to anthropomorphise things too much, and as you may have noticed I do like to put myself at the centre, OOO kind of rejects the human-centric modern philosophies and I suppose I'm still hung up on Nietzsche which is a bit of a cliché, *object itineraries* similarly has forced me to consider 'things' outside of chronological (human) life cycles, I am really trying to develop my thinking away from the linear, and I suppose the human-centric, I would argue that trying to abolish oppositional dialectics is a way to do this too...

G-M: It is really difficult to not be human-centric, we are making things for humans to look at, I think there is an alignment with how you are thinking about objects in relation to space that isn't human-centric, the home is maybe not the best example of this. I also think you are referencing the digital more than you let on, or are aware of.

AW: Maybe you're right, it's at the heart of so much of our interactions it's probably one of our most human-centric indicators. Ian Gonzcarow wrote about my work *HAUS* recently and compared it to an *object-oriented user interface*;

The work perhaps agitates against the orthodoxy of painting, in a very direct way... I engage with it because visually, I see it as a portal or a window. Portal to the internet, window for workspace are two more metaphors used in the digital realm. What I didn't mention yet, is the term object-oriented user interface or OOUI. The OOUI allows the user to interact with metaphor objects directly. An example of this would be any drawing interface that allows objects such as lines, colours and shapes to be altered. It also allows indexical signs to be overlaid onto objects such as crumple, distort, erase etc...

...Had you been in the same physical space as HAUS, you would have been able to enact the function of an OOUI, in that you could move around the piece, perhaps framing and re-framing different scenes within the exhibition space. You would have been able to rotate the content within the work 360 degrees as you circled. Thoughts of extrinsic and intrinsic are perhaps prompted by this particular interface then? Where a thing stops and its context continues. This apparently empty canvas stretcher or picture framing device, offers a range of possible indexical nudges for use. Use value of course, is part of the ongoing subtext of this text, in terms of thinking about desire. What hasn't been covered fully yet, is the question of metaphysical difference between GUI and OOUI and painting in terms of desire. In the case of HAUS it might be the desire to physically blend."(Gonzcarow, 2020)**

G-M: Interesting he should mention metaphysical, of course that was what Nietzsche was trying to move beyond.

AW: Yes and in a way *OOO* is more trying to function outside as opposed to beyond?



Studio View, March, 2021



G-M: What's a *GUI*?

AW: *GUI* is a bit like a skeuomorph actually, it stands for *graphical user interface*, they're buttons on a screen that are a graphic that take you where you want to go, eg. little graphic images of old-fashioned files that are clicked on to open digital files, which of course require nothing of the appearance of an analogue file.

I'm finding this all very confusing, it's a very transitional time in the studio at the moment and I'm enjoying moving things around, a bit like a theatre set. I'm making lists of what needs to be made and taking my time over the decisions needed to make them. When I don't know what to do, I either talk to you or get on with practical tasks like framing, varnishing, organising my screws etc.

I worry about your presence, how much am I performing for you and to fit with your thinking and expectations, fuelling my self-conscious need to articulate and explain myself?

G-M: Well, only you can answer that.

HAUS, 2020
396 x 390 x 18cm
construction timber, paint, concrete

4. portals

G-M: Shall we go back to talking about actual things? There's something really successful about the surface on these works. Their entirety as an object and the subject matter becoming amalgamated into one object, there's something happening there that isn't present in the other works where you've stuck the image on top of the wood, here it becomes part of the wood.

AW: Thanks, I'd not really thought about the image becoming part of the object in this way. I suppose I often use this process of marrying image and material, but I'd not thought of it in terms of the image becoming part of the object. The *Portals* are maybe just more articulate, precise, edited... I don't know what to think about the subject matter. I know people really like images of wood on wood and that it almost becomes a pun in a way.

G-M: Don't listen to them

AW: I will try. The impetus to make this work came from the saying to 'touch wood' so in some way they act as a talisman and in this instance it was essential for the imagery to match the phrase. I did call them the *Touch Wood* works, I think *Portals* has come from you, or maybe it is Ian's text, it was really useful to revisit that.

The work is roughly pocket-sized, so that you can hold or handle it, I like the privacy of a pocket, a connection made between hand and mind with an absence of looking (you can of course look also). The series has grown beyond this point, but I wonder whether I should anchor it back down.

G-M: It's definitely something you need to think about when it comes to presentation. I'd love to see these on a wall, I can picture a series of them with that oak bench you made. I thought you'd described them as portals, maybe that was me?

AW: Yes, I think I was calling them *Touch Woods*, you're infiltrating the work, I need to make a decision.



Touch Woods, various sizes, photographic transfer on log sections, work in progress 2021

G-M: With the exception of the mountain-scape I find myself differentiating the works as those that have a horizon and those that don't, and then also there are a couple I'm really drawn to for their ambiguity of orientation. Maybe that's where the idea of a globe, a portal has snuck in, they are windows to somewhere else but also resistant objects.

AW: I like your use of resistant, I think there is something going on across various elements of my making at the moment. A physical filling of space, in the likes of the portals and the plaster works, but then also hopefully this record of space, making space, opening up...

G-M: A presence of absence maybe? Or providing space? Is there a link to death, monuments to remember an absence, do you see this work pushing in that direction at all?

AW: The initial engagement is with the materials, the physical space, literally being present, the *dasein*¹² à la Heidegger's human centric definition. I guess the links to death have come through in works before, especially with the benches, but I would argue that it's still about that space, physical (or virtual maybe) that has the weight of something physical. I think the space or maybe more place I am circling around with this kind of negotiation of materials and form, is the personal relationship to space and notions of home that are potentially dangerous. What we put on to a place or what we keep looking for, the idea of somewhere safer and also a place that provides space to exist. Maybe lockdown has affected me more than I thought!

The use of images has always been a nod to what we romanticise and lust over but that potentially does not exist. Chasing rainbows.

G-M: Do you know Johannes Phokela's work?

AW: No.

G-M: I'm aware of him and in some ways linking him to your work through notions of belonging, I recall him saying 'We need to learn to live with the hole in our heart as opposed to trying to fill it'.¹³



above:
Worm Food, 2019
wood, plaster, paint
21 x 20.5 x 7 cm

above right:
Candle Bathing, 1998
Johannes Phokela
oil on canvas
102 x 122 cm



AW: Gosh, that's fascinating, I've been reading bell hooks' novel *All About Love*, which speaks of a unilateral inability to love or know love, we have ideas that have been fed to us,

G-M: linked to desire,

AW: yes, but essentially she proposes, unless we have ever been shown love and thus taught how to love we again can be chasing something. Quite brutal in many ways (it does get more positive), I think there is something of this desire, our wants and needs and the tangled web of what we desire being untouchable, out of reach. I think this is the space I'm concerned with, maybe I do need to learn to live with it as opposed to filling it with plaster.

G-M: Nah, therein lies disappointment! I think there is something universal amongst artists, the very act of making and not knowing what you will find out is in a way pushing the edges of space. You're all trying to occupy somewhere.

AW: Ha ha, you may be on to something. I've been trying to make series of works, something I've always struggled to do. Quite often similar works will be made over a period of time using the same methodology in their making, like the *barrier system paintings*,¹⁴ but I have to be able to pick it up and put it down as feels right.



BS37 2019
34 x 47 x 4.5cm
construction timber,
paint, plaster, photograph

Quite a lot of my ways of making are kind of commitment heavy, eg. before I know it I have a 40kg lump of plaster to live with for years to come, and so there's a natural movement around how I make, which does chop and change in response to discoveries, I am struggling to work out how I will exhibit the work I am making at the moment, lots of 'series' are being developed at different paces, they all inform one another but together might be too confusing.

G-M: Would you consider showing just one of the series?

AW: I'd worry that the work is then seen in direct comparison with one another, favourites are chosen, and the possibility of dialogue becomes lost.

G-M: You can have dialogue with a series of works! The reverse is that you present a collection of work and it appears as though one is required to explain the other, you have to constantly ask yourself, does this work function independently?

AW: There's that word 'function' again, I like giving things function, it is prominent in my making, function acts as a way in.

G-M: The different forms in this room range from amorphous plastic blobs to formal structures like the cardboard houses made of packaging and photographs, going between the entirely non-functional to this far more familiar language (in a non-functional form I might add). What's the function in the form?



Scrumpled plastic and spray paint on plaster cast 30 x 30 x 20cm approx



House shape made from packaging, and photographs 15 x 15 x 10cm approx

5. holes and wholes

AW: Maybe the function is that of the form becoming the art object, which takes it back to language, the act of calling, naming, locating something – that gives it function, the words, the naming asks the viewer to consider it in a given context. Fitting my work into a hole, framing it to make it whole...

G-M: I think you might be moulding and manipulating me in the same way you do your matter, it's not me that's shaping you, you are using me as your framing device, I'm your prop to say whatever you want!

AW: Do you think? I'm sorry you feel that way.

Maybe it's about showing the work, in many ways I have become preoccupied with the development of this work as I make towards a solo exhibition, I'm trying to second guess how it is seen. I was reading Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual*¹⁵ which suggests in order to function as an intellectual you must always be on the outside, identifying amateurism as a key component in maintaining valid enquiry, avoiding being tied to speciality. Doris Lessing talks about this too, the importance of the outsider, suggesting we should pay more attention to those who leave professions, those that reject the structures of society, of the institution(s).¹⁶

I'm very aware of a kind of professionalisation of process. I'm doing a PgCert in Academic Practice at the moment, so these notions on the formalisation of my practice are all quite pertinent, finding a space to operate academically.

You've said before that you are happiest in the process of making and in recent years have felt the need to show less and less, I think there's something in that, certainly this act of conversation is as much an activation of the work as a public presentation, but the exposing nature and varied contexts of exhibiting I find to be key to developing my understanding of the work.



The deepest hole I can dig with my arms

G-M: If we're always making towards an end (of exhibition say) this can be stifling. It is as you say (and cite) about finding a space to operate, and maybe that does work best from the outside of things? As well as the language used to frame a work there is of course the context that you just touched upon. You've titled this section 'holes and wholes', wtf?

AW: Yes, I am wondering what makes the holes whole, I'm also wondering if these are opposites and I guess trying to loop it back round to language again, the language that completes, facilitates, expands the notion of the artwork, of the space that I am moving around in. Hole is maybe incorrect, does it make you think of holes in the ground?

G-M: I suppose there is something of that, I also think of holes as being round, but you are trying to use holes to describe the space that you are leaving in your work, is that right?

AW: Yes, I guess the hole is metaphor as much as physically present, the hole is the other, the intangible, maybe going back to the start the hole is what we look for, what we need to fill, the location, or maybe the locator, and then, maybe, the works translation through language or presentation is a filling to make whole. You'll notice the heavy use of maybe... I need to stop thinking like this for now and carry on making, can I come back to you soon?

G-M: Yep, I'll be here.



A Fuller Brushman, 2021. 135 x 266 x 39cm. construction timber, paint, screws

*This conversation is written as a piece of auto-fiction, it is my lived experience, the other in the conversation is a construct but one that is informed by actual conversations that have taken place over the past year, with fellow artists, and a gallerist, conversations that have taken place in my studio, in galleries, via email and over cups of tea, it is an acknowledgement of how I have received and understood. The fictional element is not intended to deceive but to act as a device through which I can communicate as honestly as possible from my point of perception.

The use of symbolism in the borrowing of a character from early 19C Scottish fiction is an attempt at positionality, an added layer of ambiguity as to the malleability of ideas, and the origin of their sources.

Endnotes

- 1 Gil-Martin is a fictional character whose manifestation is ambiguous, the character belongs to James Hogg and is one of the central protagonists in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, 1824. Gil-Martin is largely understood to be a psychotic manifestation of the devil.
- 2 *Agisoft Metashape* is a stand-alone software product that performs photogrammetric processing of digital images and generates 3D spatial data to be used in GIS applications, cultural heritage documentation, and visual effects production as well as for indirect measurements of objects of various scales. <https://www.agisoft.com/> (accessed 1st May 2021) I understand it as a visual mapping device, that generates 3D imaging from a series of still photographs.
- 3 *Goat Moth* is taken from the title of a painting by Per Kirkeby, *Cossus Ligneperda*, I took a rough translation from this as a reference to the location and the colour palette in my work, *Goat Moth*. It is also an acknowledgement to my practice rooted in painting and the process of making these sculptures that I termed 'painting with wood'.
- 4 Ideas cited from *The Function of the Studio*, Daniel Buren, 1970. Pp 15-27 Doherty, C. (2004). *From Studio to Situation*. Black Dog Publishing
- 5 "Object itinerary has been recently proposed as an alternative to the biographical metaphor, which is seen to have been limited by the sometimes false analogy with the human lifecycle of birth, life and death (Joyce and Gillespie 2015). Instead, object itineraries trace the routes through which things circulate." Joda Joy, 2019 <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/tag2016/sessionsabstracts/session9.page>
- 6 *Citings of Public Art: Integration Versus Intervention* pp 56-99 Kwon, M (2003). *One Place After Another: site-specific art and locational identity*. MIT Press.
- 7 taken from short bio available at <https://www.sadiecoles.com/artists/10-monster-chetwynd/>
- 8 'A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). pp27 Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida*. Vintage, 2000.
- 9 pp. 9 Bennett, J., 2010. *Vibrant matter*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 10 Graham Harman, one of the theory's leading exponents, shows, *Object-Oriented Ontology* rejects the idea of human specialness: the world, he states, is clearly not the world as manifest to humans. At the heart of this philosophy is the idea that objects - whether real, fictional, natural, artificial, human or non-human - are mutually autonomous. Preface to Harman, G., 2018. *Object-Oriented Ontology*. London: Pelican.

- 11 From an essay by Ian Gonczarow 'The Contact Layer' taken from pp. 26 Kiernander, T ed. (2020) *Pictura: Painting in Montreal's Image*
- 12 "Dasein - Heidegger uses the expression Dasein to refer to the experience of being that is peculiar to human beings. Thus it is a form of being that is aware of and must confront such issues as personhood, mortality and the dilemma or paradox of living in relationship with other humans while being ultimately alone with oneself." pp. 22 Kul-Want, C. (2010) *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists*. Columbia university Press.
- 13 Taken from a studio conversation with Frances Richardson who shared studios with Johannes several years ago, May 2021
- 14 The *Barrier System Paintings* are a series of works that I have made out of the by-products of my sculpting process. I call them *Barrier Systems* in reference to my connection to the language of painting and to the painting as an art object, something I am unable to leave alone and that I have viewed as a barrier I'm unable to remove
- 15 Said, E (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual*. Vintage
- 16 pp. 16-17 Lessing, D. (1962) *The Golden Notebook*. Harper Collins, London 4th Edition 2014