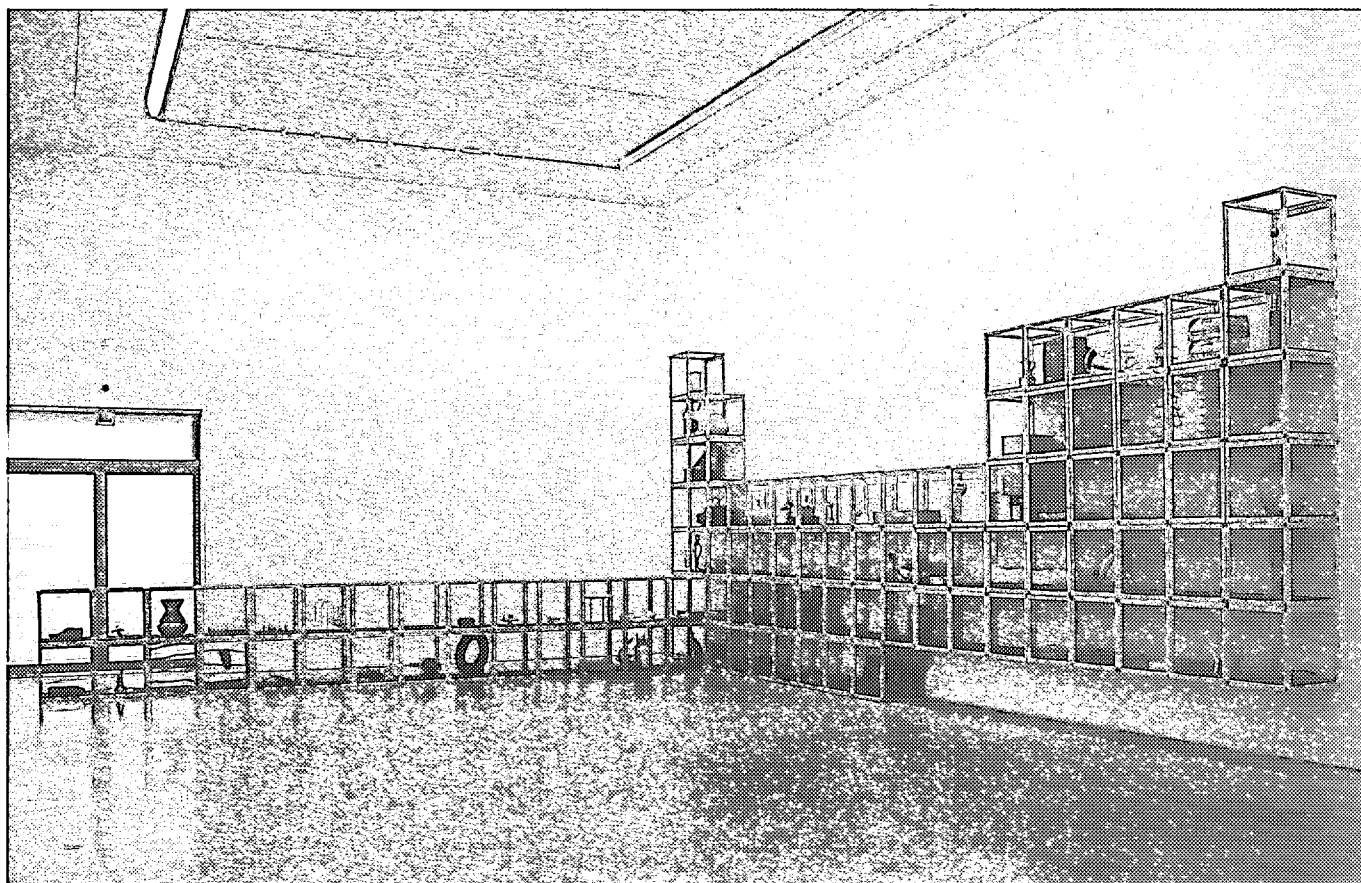


# Against Explanation



Keith Wilson *Periodic Table* 2004

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES THAT YOUNG ART STUDENTS CAN MAKE IS TO SUPPOSE THAT THEIR WORK REQUIRES SOME KIND OF PROPER EXPLANATION. It is a result of knowing that art is meant to mean something, and the error is not confined only to artists still in education. It can be painful to witness the logical and linguistic gymnastics that some are prepared to put themselves through in an effort to provide a watertight justification for their output. Nine times out of ten such an apparently convincing rationale abjectly fails to match the reality of the artwork

The gentle art of avoiding answers by **Mark Wilsher**

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in question. Quite often it is exactly that aspect of the object that resists being put into words that is interesting. Or rather, a theoretical explanation can point us in the right direction but importantly falls short of a complete translation into the register of the rational. Much has been written about the displacement of language from the literary or metaphorical content of artwork in the 19th Century to the spaces of discourse that surrounded it in the 20th, and now 21st. I am not about to make a case for a return to the poetic or the naively romantic (there are enough artists already out there apparently doing this), but I do perceive a current strand of practice that makes a virtue of its avoidance of straight answers, and could be said to deploy a conscious strategy of vagueness with the aim of producing work which resists being over-explained and ultimately subdued by the weight of rationalism.

Artistic practice is inherently uncertain, the whole process being a kind of faltering journey from there being nothing to there being something. If it was possible to lay out a set of ideas and tools that would fit together easily to comprise a piece of work then not only would art be a more pedestrian experience for all involved, but everyone would be doing it. From seeing images in stains on the wall to embracing playfulness and risk more generally, the role of the artist is one that naturally incorporates large amounts of managed undecidability. In the majority of instances this is hidden in retrospect by the verbal rationalisations and explanations that are constructed around the art object at a later date, which are necessary to protect the artist from charges of arbitrariness.

Ask sculptor Keith Wilson what his work is about and you risk being knocked down by the torrent of explanations, anecdotes and parallels that he will assail you with. A leaning piece of wood is titled *T-rescue* because of its T-shaped cross section, and the T-shape made by two canoes when one goes to the assistance of another (and a dozen more related images). His large *Periodic Table*, 2004, made for Milton Keynes Gallery echoes the scientific classification of elements by setting up relationships between a huge amount of studio clutter, from redundant machinery to logs and empty beer cases. In some cases there was a clear link between the object (an unidentifiable small round thing) and its place in the table (helium). For the most part however, this was a symphony of allusion without rhyme or reason. The

artist's ready supply of stories and suggestions regarding the accumulated junk played the same role as the borrowed structure of the periodic table, seeming to imply relationships between heterogeneous materials where none in fact existed. Wilson's tendency to bombard the viewer with exegesis is so pronounced that Penelope Curtis began a *Milch* catalogue essay from 2003 with it, 'Words, words, words. Keith Wilson has a wonderful facility with words, running them together in unexpected combinations which are both off the peg and newly minted, linking street discourse and academic discourse with gravity defying ease ... To a considerable extent Wilson is defined by his language for those who meet and work with him'. But for all their helpful filling in of detail and rationale, none of his explanations ever comes close to providing a real reason for the artwork to exist in this particular way. His working method is to create a cloud of significations, out of which is distilled a set of objects which are related by so many connections on so many different levels that none of them take precedence. What you are left with is the artwork, qualitatively the same as the objects of ordinary life in that they can be picked up and used to mean one thing or another but ultimately meaning nothing in particular, just getting on with the business of existing in the world. In this way he uses his vagueness to say something about the texture of life.

And he is not alone, in all areas from painting to curation the vague and undefined are increasingly welcomed. Tacita Dean's selections for the exhibition 'An Aside' (see AM285) were suggested by anecdotal links and a return to André Breton's notion of objective chance. Curating while pregnant, Dean admits in the catalogue that her methods veered 'from the intuitive to the social, and from the orthodox to the inexplicable'. When one way of working threatened to become too prescriptive, she resisted and sought out another. A story told by Lothar Baumgarten led to work by Gerhard Richter, and subsequently a selection of portrait busts, while Raymond Hains's mention that Marcel Duchamp had read everything by Jules Verne while working in the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève brought in a group of work relating to Verne's story of the Green Ray. The result is an attractively open show, where connections between works are felt rather than forced into a theme, and the guiding aesthetic comes from an appreciation of the sum of the parts not some top down theoretical template. The experience of being given the chance to draw your own connections between works rather than attempting to understand how something fits into a fixed theoretical framework underlines how used we have become in recent years to the suffocating orthodoxy of accredited and professionalised curating, where an overarching idea often seems to take precedence over the actual artworks.

We have become accustomed to artists aiming for ambiguity in their work, especially since the 80s when the idea of the sign that simultaneously performs a critique of its own foundations became the lingua franca of the commercial art world. But ambiguity implies an undecided choice between two alternative readings (back then often seen in terms of ironic vs conservative). It became a kind of shorthand for postmodern distancing, merely reflecting the relativistic images of contemporary

culture rather than making a clear statement about their desirability or emptiness. As such, the quality of ambiguity has come to mean almost nothing in itself. All too often it is the default ambition for artworks which are predominantly concerned with asserting their own status as convincing cultural commodities. Silence is a shield against being found out. Better to say nothing than to risk saying the wrong thing and alienating those who control the purse strings. In aim and intention, this is obviously a long way from the idea of a writerly text that Umberto Eco formulated in his 1962 essay 'The Open Work'. With reference to the new scientific paradigms of uncertainty in subatomic physics he advocated creative work which didn't try to impose one particular interpretation, or even a narrow set of interpretations.

Artists making use of vagueness today are similarly saying too much, rather than too little. Real uncertainty is much more than simply a choice between A & B. It suggests possible terms of reference without being sure. It hints at parameters but doesn't locate anything within them. It always seems to imply a great wealth of possibilities out there to be drawn upon, far more than any straightforward reading might involve. And yet for the generosity of all these potential answers, none seems really to be correct. Just consider the press release from Fergal Stapleton's recent show at Counter, an exhibition of 'paintings of interior twilights, ash atmospherics, hope expressed in loose change, woozy surface mix-ups, semi-curious squints at uncertain shapes and irrelevant light-sources. They are tunnel-visioned illuminations of the things that really matter, such as whether you've got that balled up note on you, what that thing in the corner reminds you of, or what's really being celebrated when a strip of tinsel from eight Christmases ago is hanging off the ceiling'.

The practice of art as an unaccountable excess has surfaced as an issue before, indeed it is part of the commonly held perception that artworks somehow contain meanings which are more profound than it is possible to put into words. Academic cultural theory tries to contain this excess in various notions like the 'libidinal economy', 'the uncanny', 'affectivity' or simply the 'real'. Indeed the vast majority of art theory could perhaps be said to have as its aim the containment and analysis of art's dangerously attractive spillage, going right back to ideas of religious devotion and the aesthetics of the sublime. A strategic return to the suggestive and elliptical today might signal the recognition that these various discourses have proved inadequate and run their course. Gavin Butt has written recently in his book *After Criticism* on the way postmodern undecidability has ossified into a doctrine of certainty. He describes a state of affairs in which 'a body of work renowned for its deconstruction of authorial value comes

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to be accredited with precisely such forms of authority. What does the undergraduate student do in order to substantiate his argument about, for example, the representation of masculinity in contemporary art? Answer: he cites the proper name Derrida (or similar), and the authority of his body (of work), in order to underwrite his analysis of masculinity's rhetoric of "presence". Butt speculates that contemporary art may have now 'passed through' its encounter with theory, and the book brings together a range of alternative approaches to criticism that have in common their refusal of established models. To embrace ambiguity today it is necessary to stay outside of these once helpful frames, to be difficult, eccentric and silent.

This might bring to mind the silence of Duchamp which, overrated or not, established a paradigmatic space in which the work was able to exist in a state of unresolved complexity for a time before the interpretation industry moved in. It is worth remembering, too, that his so-called silence was actually full of notes, maxims and epigrams. As time goes by and theoretical models of ambiguity unavoidably turn into dogmatic caricatures of themselves, it seems that some artists have discovered a viable way of gesturing at the content and character of their art by saying nothing definite and leaving all avenues open. It is an oppositional stance – against simplistic readings, against over-theorisation, against anything which might serve to undermine the uniquely contradictory condition of art. Paradoxically in opting for the elliptical and open they know exactly what they're doing. This work neatly sidesteps the deadening effects of explanation and lives to play another day. ▣

MARK WILSHER's exhibition 'The History of Sculpture' is at the Chapman Gallery, University of Salford from May 9 to 20.

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