LIST PROJECTS 23:
Andrew Norman Wilson

October 22, 2021–January 9, 2022

MIT List Visual Arts Center

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Bakalar Gallery October 22, 2021–January 9, 2022

Andrew Norman Wilson works primarily in moving image and installation, drawing on a range of filmic conventions to examine intersecting histories of cinema, image circulation, and labor. The corporate and political interests that undergird the so-called creative economy are a persistent theme for Wilson. His past works have taken a critical eye to Google (*Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, 2011) and Eastman Kodak (*Kodak*, 2019) to consider how Silicon Valley, the entertainment industry, and the art world manufacture cultural products from contracted labor.

For his first solo exhibition at a United States institution, Wilson debuts a new video, *Impersonator* (2021), alongside the recent *Kodak* (2019), bringing together two films that touch on different dimensions of the image production and entertainment industries and those they employ. *Impersonator* follows an unhoused character impersonator on Los Angeles' Hollywood Boulevard who seeks connection to the world the through radical, Hollywood-oriented conspiracy theories that they consume by way of a Bluetooth headset soldered into the helmet of their storm-trooper-like costume. *Kodak* centers on Rich, a former employee of the Eastman Kodak Corporation caught in an obsessive conversation with archival audio recordings of the company's founder George Eastman. Both works capture their respective protagonists grappling with obsolescence, unproductivity, and a growing sense of alienation. Seen together, the films speak to Wilson's evolving interest in multilayered fictions and how media and cinema have the capacity to influence human perception, attitudes, and behavior by affecting our sense of the real.

COVER: *Impersonator*, 2021 (detail from a still).

Impersonator, 2021

4K video, color, sound, 17:00 min.
Courtesy the artist

In contrast to Wilson's previous works, *Impersonator* engages narrative cinema's tropes of continuous live action and a linear plot, weaving in references to the Disney entertainment franchise throughout. The film follows a character impersonator on Hollywood Boulevard whose costume appears to be an off-brand mix of Star Wars Stormtrooper, Halo soldier, and doomsday prepper. Their persona fails to capture the interest of tourists, leaving the impersonator in debt and unhoused.

Throughout the film, the impersonator's actions are accompanied by audio from "Axis Hollywood," a podcast that bills itself as an "independent investigation of the points at which the entertainment industry meets intelligence services, the security state, the military, finance, organized crime, and even pedophile rings." The impersonator, whose increasingly bizarre activities suggest desperation and a descent into delusion, listens as the podcast host riffs on a 9/11 conspiracy involving the *It's a Very Merry Muppet Christmas Movie* before interviewing an unhoused activist named Queen Cache about her skepticism on the existence of a murderer said to be preying on the city's houseless population. A gliding camera trails the impersonator as they amble from Hollywood Boulevard to an encampment on the LA River where they find police, supposedly investigating the disappearances, confiscating their tent. Capturing the protagonist's precarity and disenfranchisement, Wilson's cinematography employs the perspective of third-person shooter video games to underscore how certain moving image tropes can dehumanize a character and render them "disposable."

Kodak, 2019

HD video, color, sound, 33:00 min.
Courtesy the artist

Kodak centers on Rich, a semi-fictional former employee of the Eastman Kodak Corporation who is loosely based on the artist's father. After being blinded in a workplace accident, Rich spends his days at the Rochester Public Library where he attempts to make sense of his life and work by listening to archival cassette tapes of Kodak founder George Eastman's personal reminiscences. Like Rich, the Eastman tapes are an amalgam of truths from the mogul's biographies that are subject to the artist's embellishments. Wilson and screenplay cowriter James N. Kienitz Wilkins modeled *Kodak*'s script after the one-act play for one actor and a cassette tape, *Krapp's Last Tape*, by Samuel Beckett.

The clicks of the cassette player's advance, Eastman's recordings, and Rich's monologue are set against a mesmeric sequence of vignettes of digitally altered archival materials from the Eastman Museum and the University of Rochester. These are joined by images from the artist's family archive, fittingly shot on Kodak-brand film stock and magnetic tape. Incorporating both fact and fiction, *Kodak* confronts contentious labor histories at the Eastman Kodak corporation as well as the company's pivotal effect on image production through the invention of roll film and the introduction of affordable pocket cameras.

The Impersonator's Fist: Locating Realism in Fiction

In the final minutes of Andrew Norman Wilson's most recent film *Impersonator*, the titular protagonist, a failing Hollywood Boulevard character impersonator whose identifying features are obscured by a crash helmet outfitted with a reflective eye-shield, hops in the bed of a pickup truck driving into a car wash. Ostensibly, this is a desperate effort to clean their sci-fi/paramilitary-esque costume, which is encrusted with mud and grime from a night spent sleeping on the banks of the Los Angeles river after their tent was confiscated by police supposedly investigating a string of murders. For a disorienting 20 seconds, the film enters the carwash and the camera appears to shoot through the impersonator's visor as they are pickled in industrial detergents, scrubbed by automated sponges, and sprayed with atomized wax—a *ballet mécanique* that underscores the character's dehumanization. This strange moment in Wilson's film is the only one that utilizes a first-person perspective in which the camera "sees" through the impersonator's point of view; most of the time, the camera trails them as if they're a disposable avatar in a third-person shooter game.

Quickly cutting to the impersonator outside the vehicle, the camera now focuses on their gloved hand, which they ball into a fist to wring out sudsy water from a costume that has failed to pay their bills. The gesture calls to mind two images, one from contemporary meme culture and the other from art history. The former is the so-called "Arthur's Fist" reaction image, a meme in which the clenched fist of the cartoon aardvark Arthur is "accompanied by captions describing various infuriating or frustrating circumstances"[1] and the latter is the pronounced, productive, hand of an agrarian peasant laborer scattering seeds into a tilled field in French Realist painter Jean-François Millet's *The Sower* (1850).

Beyond the striking compositional similarities to this moment in *Impersonator*, as extra-textual references, this pair of images offer useful entries into the work. The Arthur fist, Wilson's cinematographic inspiration for the shot, also carries its meme context as a relatable, portable, and slightly playful cipher for a sense of righteous indignation at one's circumstance. Generated more than a century and a half prior, Millet's potent representation of the agrarian laborer in *The Sower* is emblematic of the historical formation of Realism as a socially-engaged artistic strategy—one which in

LEFT: *Impersonator*, 2021 (detail from a still).

THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Screen capture used in the popular "Arthur's Fist" meme; Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850 (detail). Collection, Museum of Fine Arts Boston; Andrew Norman Wilson, *Impersonator*, 2021 (detail from a still).

Impersonator, 2021 (still).

mid-nineteenth-century France espoused a proletariat-oriented class politic that was profoundly threatening to the French bourgeoisie. In its embrace of the "realism" and continuity of narrative fiction film, *Impersonator* marks a moment of rupture in Wilson's practice—one that his "works about cinema," in their overt thematic and political concerns, have been inching towards for some time, and one which is also informed by the infuriating circumstances (i.e. economic hardship) faced by most artists (and many cultural workers) today.[2]
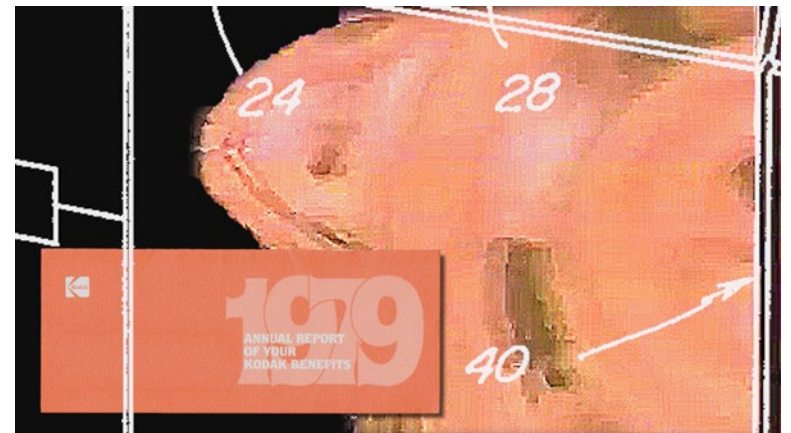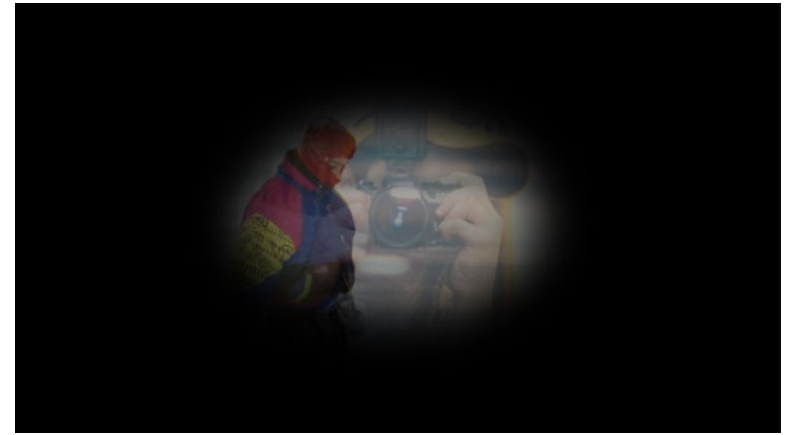
For the last decade, Wilson has engaged with the moving image as a visual artist, and over this period his works have tended to focus on material histories of the moving image and laboring or unproductive (but equally alienated) subjects under capitalism. Past works have drawn on specific filmic conventions to look at moments where cinema, image circulation, and labor intersect with the corporate and political interests that undergird the so-called creative economy. In 2011, for example, Wilson made a documentary video essay profiling an underclass of workers at Google (the artist briefly worked as a video producer for the tech giant). Its title, *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, as well as its use of footage that indexes the comings and goings of a commuter parking lot outside a building on Google's campus where "Scan-ops" workers hand-digitized print publications for the Google Books Project, are both

direct references to the Lumière brothers' 1895 film, *Workers Leaving the Factory*, which is widely regarded as the first motion picture ever made. From this near-mythic origin point of cinema, Wilson's works have quoted from and participated in a wide spectrum of filmic trajectories. After *Workers*, Wilson sought to make work that, in his words, "implicitly acknowledges the illusory, deceptive qualities of not only art but also reality itself."[3] In subsequent films he turned away from the didacticism of documentary and instead began implementing and "breaking" specific filmic techniques or cinematic forms—such as digital animation and structural film—in order to scrutinize the moving image's claims to realism.[4] Wilson's most recent works have engaged fiction as an epistemological subject and increasingly as a mode of address (works like the ongoing video series $Z=|Z/Z•Z/-1 \bmod 2|-1$, for example, assert that fiction itself is a potent economic force capable of contouring reality).

"Technology is a glittering lure," admonishes the late media mogul and founder of Eastman Kodak, George Eastman. Lest we forget the capacity for deception inherent in technical images, this warning is heard within a fictionalized audio-tape that forms the sonic backbone of *Kodak* (2019). Presented in counterpoint to *Impersonator* in the List Center exhibition, *Kodak's* metafictional narrative deconstructs the ideological power

and ontological status of lens-made images and unravels hidden aspects of the human labor around image production. Like *Impersonator,* it centers a protagonist grappling with a growing sense of alienation as well as the obsolescence of his work. Rich, a semi-fictional former employee of the Eastman Kodak Corporation loosely based on the artist's father, was blinded in a workplace accident.[5] He spends his days at the Rochester Public Library where he attempts to make sense of his life and work by listening to archival cassette tapes of Eastman's audio memoirs. Rich's increasingly incoherent observations form a conversation with the Eastman tapes, and the work's accompanying visuals seem to be related apparitions from Rich's mind's eye. Subtle and mesmeric post-production effects on Wilson's family photos and videos and on reproduced marketing materials from the Kodak archives appear throughout the first three quarters of the 33-minute video. In its final minutes, these abruptly dissolve into a glaring CGI render of the interior of the Rochester Public Library, and then melt into even more nightmarish and confrontational computer graphics. Similar ruptures from one visual or cinematic style to another are found in a number of Wilson's other works. Live-action footage of an abandoned asylum shot on a misused Steadicam in *Ode to Seekers 2012* (2016), for example, is punctured by a slick, CGI animation sequence of a mosquito, a syringe, and an oil pump. In *Z = | Z/Z•Z/-1 mod 2 |-1: Lavender Town Syndrome* (2020), a tightly composed procession of 16-second zooms onto an exterior balcony of Chicago's Marina City Apartments gives way to hallucinatory configurations of digitally rendered fractals. Typically, these breaks occur towards the end of each work, after the viewer is fully committed to the filmic world the artist has constructed. Puncturing the continuity of what had been established up to that moment, these ruptures explicitly underscore the artifice of the entire cinematic experience.

With *Impersonator*, which draws on the continuity of narrative cinema, the rupture may be the form of the work itself—that of conventional fiction filmmaking—set against the larger context of Wilson's practice, which otherwise has embraced experimental approaches to narrative. After a decade of engaging with the history of the moving image, Wilson has chosen not just to distort cinema's forms or rules, but to play by them. Artist-made moving images have been many things, and the varied of output of artists wielding cameras is, as ever, a topic for scholarly debate.[6] But even within this contested terrain, and an increasingly expansive view of that which constitutes artist-cinema, continuous, fictional narrative is generally agreed to be what distinguishes the classic, commercial form known as "movies" from artist's videos and other forms of experimental film. In this light, *Impersonator*'s cinematic ambitions (and Wilson's public acknowledgement that a career as a contemporary artist, or as a character impersonator, won't pay the bills[7]) have something in common with the realism that Millet scandalized Paris with, its salons otherwise hung with the grand epics of history painting. The French artist's representations of the activities of the rural underclass exploited by capitalism—sowing grain (*The Sower*, 1850) or collecting the scraps and leavings from its harvest to feed their families (*The Gleaners*, 1857)—shed light on their struggles for subsistence. And while the naturalistic, representational style he employed in these works may have suited their humble subject matter, Millet's Realism was a self-conscious rejection of the established academic style of the time. Wilson too has turned away from accepted styles of moving image art and towards an embrace of narrative fiction filmmaking. And for Wilson, what might be called realism is not a verité documentary style, but any form in which unsettling economic realities are laid bare.

Kodak, 2019 (stills).

Kodak, 2019 (still).

ENDNOTES

1   "Arthur's Fist." Know Your Meme, August 31, 2021. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/arthurs-fist.

2   Andrew Norman Wilson, "Impersonator by Andrew Norman Wilson: Treatment/Script/Mood Board/ Statement," Google Docs, March 4, 2021, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Wtka5lD-sPagffo9jUe7UTwL-V1XtYoAC5B82ihQ0bY/edit.

3   Andrew Norman Wilson "Producing the Social: Andrew Norman Wilson Interviewed by Jared Quinton," *BOMB*, February 21, 2019. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/producing-the-social-andrew-norman-wilson-interviewed/.

4   Ibid.

5   Another source of inspiration is Samuel Beckett's semi-autobiographical character, Krapp.

6   For a comprehensive study of the moving image exhibited in a contemporary art context, see Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

7   See Wilson's statements in his exhibition text for his solo show *In the Air Tonight* at Los Angeles alternative space Canary Test, September 10—October 31, 2021: http://www.thecanarytest.com/#/in-the-air-tonight.

8   See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*? (London: Zero Books, 2009).

9   Within the world of the film, it's doubtful that the impersonator is actually the murderer—what's more likely is that this closing act, like bathing in a carwash, stems from desperation. It's uncertain that a murderer exists at all. The street legend, Queen Cache, an antagonistic guest on a conspiratorial podcast Axis Hollywood that the impersonator listens to throughout the film, intimates that "The Stranger" is more likely a boogeyman invented by the cops and media to scare people off the streets, or to cover up more nefarious city-led means of thinning the at-risk populations living on the streets.

Even so, there are many arguments against the viability of fiction film as an effective form of social critique, among them Mark Fisher's theorization of Capitalist Realism and his related coinage, "corporate anti-capitalism," which posits that critiques of capitalism are already baked into mainstream media and that their regular occurrence in Hollywood movies, in television, and other major media forms renders them safe, palatable, and un-seditious.[8] Context is key, though, and while using the *form* of narrative fiction film, and always conscious and savvy of how media operates, the conditions surrounding Wilson's production place it far outside of the mainstream (in media terms). Until very recently, his work has been located exclusively in the domain of contemporary art. And one of art's main currencies is criticality—particularly a suspicion of any media that is easily consumed. However, there is also a profound gap between criticality and accountability in this domain. More and more the status quo, "institutional critique," and a reflexive brand of cynicism that descends from it, feeds the grist mill of the art economy, churning out artworks and discourse with critical stances that rarely seem to affect the circumstances of production— that is, the basic economic conditions under which art workers work. Rather than offering up an institutional critique, with *Impersonator*, Wilson employs narrative fiction as a form, that, like the Arthur meme, operates through its relatability. It is worth noting that Wilson's anonymous protagonist (the impersonator's voice, gender, and any identifying features are all concealed) distinguishes the work from debates around representation in socially-engaged popular media. In their anonymity, the impersonator becomes, in Wilson's words, "an empty screen" onto whom a viewer's own identity and experience are projected in an identification with the protagonist's struggle. Wilson's moving image portrait of this unproductive fringe worker concludes at a police station. Limping into the downtown LA precinct, the impersonator turns themselves in to the cops claiming to be a killer (which the media has dubbed "The Stranger") who has been murdering the inhabitants of LA's streets and tent cities.[9] Utterly exhausted, the impersonator collapses on the precinct floor in an act of desperation that is utterly relatable.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Andrew Norman Wilson (b. 1983 Millis, MA) lives and works in Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions include *Lavender Town Syndrome*, *Ordet*, *Milan* (2020); *In Practice: Total Disbelief*, Sculpture Center, New York (2020); *Hirngespenster*, Kunstverein Braunschweig (2019); *Picture Industry*, Luma Foundation, Arles (2018); and *Dreamlands*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2017). His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Le Centre national des arts plastiques France, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, the Stolbun Collection, Polyeco Contemporary Art Initiative, Collection Lambert, and the Kadist Foundation.

List Projects 23: Andrew Norman Wilson is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Fictions, Realism, and the Motion Picture Industry
Wednesday, November 17, 5:30 PM
Online program

Curator Talk: Andrew Norman Wilson
Friday, November 5, 12:00 PM
In-person program

All programs are free and open to the public. Registration required.
For more information about these events and to register visit listart.mit.edu/ events-programs.

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