

## A Horse with wheels - Clemens Wilhelm

Clemens Wilhelm is one of the most interesting young filmmakers and video artists currently working in Europe. Having produced a diverse body of work concerned with subjects from poetics to the construction of meaning to, in a direct but resonant style.

His new film “A Horse With Wheels” is an elegant, witty essay on the function of art itself, a project which took him five years to film, a mere moment compared to the 13,000 years of history it spans, and is on view at Queens Park Railway Club. The film deals with what it terms ‘the turbulence caused when two images collide in your head’ - in this case the titular horse with wheels, a cart being driven on a road carrying a horse, and a carving of two swimming reindeer from the Last Ice Age.

I met with Wilhelm in Glasgow to discuss his film, and to ask him the question, what came first – the horse with wheels or the reindeer carving?

Wilhelm answered, “Almost at the same time, you know when you see something, and somehow it connects with something else you have seen, and the connection doesn’t make sense, but later you figure out why you made that connection. It really happened like I tell it in the film: I was driving alone on a highway at dawn, and I saw this cart with a horse, and because I was in this state where you’re relaxed and half thinking, like a meditation state, I looked at this horse. I’d never seen it like that before: it really hit me how absurd it actually is, how absurd a lot of things are that we do, this constant striving for more technology, better technology, progress at all cost. Now look at this horse, it’s still a horse, we haven’t improved the horse, we’ve just made it faster, in a really ridiculous way.”

“But what do you do with the horse when you arrive? You unload it and you still get on the horse and ride the horse – it’s this senseless speeding up of processes at such a high ecological cost. I mean, that’s a 1000 kilo car, pulling 500 kilos of trailer, burning up fossil fuels to make a horse go faster – it’s so stupid, why do we do that?”

The rest of the film could be interpreted as a response to that question, as it casts a scathing eye over the myth of human progress, contrasting the banality of much of modern life and cultural production with the archetypal beauty and singularity of the carving, which he also encountered accidentally.

“I found it on the internet, when looking for something else. I first thought it must be fake. I couldn’t believe it was so old, because it was in such good shape.”

“Three months later, the British Museum announced that they were making an exhibition around this piece. They had this exhibition, “Art and the Modern Mind”, and they brought together these amazing pieces from the Ice Age from all across Europe and Siberia, all centering around this reindeer sculpture. This is where I saw the original for the first time.”

“It just has such an aura – not just because it’s in the British Museum, and you walk into a ‘temple of art’ – if I were to put it on the table right now, it would fascinate you.”

While the carving may well be aesthetically pleasing, Wilhelm sees the real value of the piece as being a link to the past, and the consciousness of the past – at one point in the film, he refers to it as ‘a lighthouse in the ocean of deep time’.



“What struck me about it was that it could speak to me at all – it’s 13,000 years old. It was an idea in someone’s head, they imagined it, and then they transformed it into a material – that alone is a very big step.”

“I live in a completely different society, a completely different climate, but I still recognise this “as language”, this was made by someone like me. This connection is possible over such a distance in time - I am continuing a thought that is 13000 years old. That’s why it’s not a “useless tool” – I think it’s a very powerful tool.”

While the film muses on the distance in time and culture that produced this artifact, there this a gap that Wilhelm attempts to close, to catch up with.

“13,000 years sounds very abstract, you can’t really imagine what that means, but if you calculate one generation is 25 years, it’s only 500 generations, and a line of 500 people you can imagine.”

“It’s not that long ago, we just don’t know very much about it – we remember very little. I researched it, and realized it’s of course not the oldest piece, there are other pieces which are 30,000 years old, 17,000 years older than this one, but it doesn’t matter – it’s still unimaginably old.”

“Back then they weren’t just making naturalistic representations of reindeer, in the same cave they also found a mammoth which looks like a Picasso, almost cubist. So already they had different modes of representation.”

This brings us to one of the central themes of the film, the actual use and value of art, how it functions within society, and how it functioned in a society very different from ours, which is often more concerned with its exchange value.

“I definitely think that you can see there was a necessity for art when they made this reindeer piece. At this time humanity was going through a global warming like ours” – though ours will be bigger than theirs, he jokes – “and they needed this new tool to survive. It may have been our imagination that saved us. As a contemporary artist you are constantly confronted by the rest of society thinking that what you do is worthless, that it has no function and is just a luxury for the rich, as if it was an inside joke that outsiders just don’t get, turning shit into gold etc., as if it was all a scam. I think it’s dangerous to think like that and missing the point – art is more than that, it’s a very narrow view of art, but a lot of media do tend to present art like that.”

Certainly, this reindeer sculpture, being portable and accessible, has been carried about by a tribe, carefully looked after and preserved for thousand of years – much contemporary art is, of course, designed to be monumental and inaccessible – but will it last as long?

“I read an interview with Werner Herzog, who I like very much, and he said that we don’t have adequate images in our society anymore because it’s a consumer society, and every image is attached to advertisements, and advertising corrupts any kind of image.

What Herzog was saying is that we’re going to die out like the dinosaurs, because we don’t have adequate images anymore, and if people were educated in reading images like they are in reading books, maybe if we had an education system based on that, people wouldn’t be so illiterate in reading images. Most people go through their lives not being able to read images, and falling for the manipulation



of advertising, which is very powerful, of course. But if a culture doesn't produce adequate images anymore – this is an image of love, this is an image of connection, this is an image of the group coming together – if we lose that, what the postmodernists called grand narratives – then we are indeed in a major crisis.”

“I think Herzog is much more radical than the postmodernists in saying that our survival as a species is threatened because we don't produce the right images anymore.”

This is not calling for a codified system of representations as in the Renaissance – Herzog's images are famously ambiguous, too slippery to be interpreted strictly as symbols, but do function on a higher level as metaphors.

“He calls them deep images, which will stay with people – I agree that we don't have enough of them.”

Certainly, “A Horse With Wheels” plays with a metonymic chain of images, which only becomes entirely evident on a second viewing. The opening image shows a cracked smartphone screen, prefiguring a discarded smartphone by a cave – the cracked image will then become associated with the possibility of another imminent environmental catastrophe, linking the film's critique of the myth of progress, and the banality and disposability of much contemporary image-making with art's potential function as a means to deal with crisis.

However, while I raised the contemporary images of Stone Age people represented in a diorama as being symptomatic of banality, Wilhelm leapt to their defence – somewhat.

“It's a story being told through sculptures – this is something that still works, we still use sculptures today to tell each other stories. But these amusement park sculptures of our ancestors that you see in the film are very condescending, these sculptures make our ancestors look like primitives.

That is something I never understood from my education, why cave people were supposed to be stupid? After all, we are all descendants of monkeys, and even monkeys are smart. Why should our ancestors have been primitive? We simply have no evidence that suggests that. Just because they didn't have iPhones? We all would not be here today if they had been primitive.”

The respect which Wilhelm demonstrates toward the people of the Stone and Iron Age he also extends to the Sami, contemporary reindeer herders in Scandinavia who helped him to film swimming reindeer.

Indeed, the beautiful images of reindeer slaughter and carcasses placed almost as if in an installation are amongst the most striking in the film.

“I didn't stage anything. Anatomy is beautiful, I've always been fascinated by it. I find the textures, the colours and mechanisms of bodies beautiful. You can tell that the person who carved “The Swimming Reindeer” knew everything about the anatomy of the reindeer. Like Michelangelo who had to dissect people to become a great artist, these reindeer people knew everything inside and outside. I was there when the Sami were killing and butchering the reindeer – it was an amazing sight. “There was this young woman, she was maybe 18. She killed the reindeer with just a knife and then cut it up in twenty minutes, right in front of me. I was almost in a trance, watching her do this in the sunlight under an open sky, her knife dancing through this animal. Her arms were covered in blood, and she was completely



in the flow of this action. That was one of those deep images - I was so strangely attracted to this image of this woman who knew how to do all this. In cities we live just so removed from all of this, from death, we forget that killing is a necessary skill.”

While “A Horse With Wheels”, like much of Wilhelm’s work, is concerned with the social sphere, and how it is represented, he firmly rejects the didactic or programmatic.

“I don’t think the role of art is to criticise society. I don’t think about other art when I make my work, and I don’t think about what the artistic community will say, I think it’s important to address more people. I want my films to be accessible to people who don’t have an art education, because I don’t want to make art about art. Of course I made this film about this object, which might be art, which might be the first art object, but I don’t think it’s a film about art, but maybe about what it is like to be human, then and now.”

“A Horse With Wheels” is, of course, ultimately a film about art, but one that critiques it in a provocative manner, rather than being another sterile, academic rehash of once radical tropes, as in too much contemporary video practice.

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