

Andrew Norman Wilson

Movement Materials and What We Can Do

Site-specific performance for the browser, tenstakonsthall.se

March 25–June 15, 2013



Andrew Norman Wilson's work looks at globalization and its emergent forms and flows of labor, capital, and information. With his performance *Movement Materials and What We Can Do*, Wilson employs corporate, academic and artistic lecture techniques in order to address the intertwining concerns of his two previous projects, *Workers Leaving the GooglePlex* and *ScanOps*.

Workers Leaving the GooglePlex investigates the marginalized class of Google Books "ScanOps" workers at Google's international corporate headquarters in Silicon Valley. Wilson documents the yellow badged ScanOps workers, while simultaneously chronicling the complex events surrounding his own dismissal from the company. The reference to the Lumière Brother's 1895 film *Workers Leaving the Factory* situates the video within motion picture history, suggesting transformations and continuities in arrangements of labor, capital, media, and information.

ScanOps is based on Google Books images in which software distortions, the scanning site, and the hands of the "ScanOps" employees are visible. Through varied analog presentations, the aesthetics of the images and the apparatuses that produced them are foregrounded over the originally intended content. These re-materializations are treated as

photography—taking the form of framed image-sculptures, compiled in a mobile book-sculpture, and presented in a performance-lecture.

Throughout *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* medium-specific considerations and various histories of film, video, photography and publishing media are addressed—emphasizing the materiality of both analog and digital media and the labor processes they entail.

Artist Andrew Norman Wilson in conversation with Tensta konsthall Associate Curator Laurel Ptak about his recent work and about creating a browser-based performance for tenstakonsthall.se

Laurel Ptak: Can you explain how and why you first got interested in thinking about Google's labor practices as a subject matter for your artistic work?

Andrew Norman Wilson: I was directly implicated in their labor practices when I worked there as a contracted employee. As outlined in my video *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, I worked on Google's campus headquarters and wore a red badge like most other contracted employees. The full-time employees wore white badges, while interns wore green. In the video, these classes are seen passing by, entering, and exiting a variety of buildings at the Googleplex. Some of them ride Google loaner bikes, some of them enter a luxury limo shuttle headed towards San Francisco. Some of them may be leaving work, some may be walking to another building to pick up their laundry or exercise in one of the gyms, some may even be just arriving at the Google campus to eat a free meal from one of twenty gourmet cafes after a day of working at home.

But from my office, I noticed a fourth class of workers who wore yellow badges and left at the same time every day. They stood out on the Google campus because of their race and their attire. The yellow badge workers are seen leaving the one building that they are allowed access to. They are leaving all at the same time because their superiors have asked them to. But their synchronized departure is not especially arranged for a camera. They are leaving at 2:15 pm, like they do every day. The separation and exclusion of the yellow badge class creates difference in movement.

LP: Can you contextualize the films by the Lumière brothers and Harun Farocki which have been an important influence here?

ANW: In Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), he discusses how in the Lumière Brother's film, also called *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895), the primary aim was to represent motion; in particular to create an image of a work force in motion, organized simultaneously by the work structure (a temporal synchronization), the factory gates (a spatial grouping), and the filmmakers' choreography of this spatio-temporal relationship. Yet we have come to recognize that moving images not only represent movement, but can also grasp for concepts. This is what Farocki's film is about—how signs and symbols are taken from reality, as if "the world itself wanted to tell us something." He uses a particular motif in film history—that of workers leaving the factory—to interpret.

The original *Workers* and my own present social and technological conditions of their time. Both tell us things. Both represent movement. However, in my representation of movement, the work takes a departure from the other works. What we see are clearly defined tiers of workers. Class scripting movement.

LP: *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* interestingly incorporates material from *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, taking up and expanding its concerns. How did this performance piece come about and what issues does it seek to address?

ANW: When the Googleplex video went viral, I was often asked to present this work to an audience. To me was more interesting to treat these lectures as performances and *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* attempts to deal with the corporate, academic, and artistic networks that the project operates within by taking up modes of presentation from those three fields. Those fields are deeply intertwined throughout contemporary society, and so in the moment of performance I try to highlight their presence. It's also a coming together of bodies, and I like people to be aware of their bodies within the space. The lecture walks through the Googleplex and ScanOps projects with an emphasis on movement and materiality—regarding film, video, photography, literature, the project's subjects, the technologies of display that I'm using.

LP: Can you talk about your thoughts and process in adapting *Movement Materials and What We Can Do* specifically for tenstakonsthall.se? I'm curious what it means to turn a performance into something site-specific for the browser that is addressed to many

anonymous internet users? How does this adaptation build on the concerns already present in your other work?

ANW: The live PowerPoint performance is intended specifically for bodies in a room with me and a projector, so I had to shift the wording and imagery towards what I imagined would be a single viewer in either a home or a workplace. It's a continuation of my interests in movement and materiality amidst internet use and labor processes, and is geared towards dismissing the distinction between "real life" and interactions that happen on the internet—it's all real life.

LP: The work I first encountered of yours—also addressed inside *Movement Materials and What We Can Do*—was the photographic series *ScanOps*. I was immediately interested in the way it touches on contemporary political concerns—how labor and class exist inside an information economy as well as the role of intellectual property and the increasing privatization and corporatization of knowledge.

ANW: I have been quietly collecting anomalies from Google Books for a couple years now. The photographs that I choose are images in which software distortions, the imaging site, and the hands of Google employees are visible.

The fingers and software distortions that obscure the "pure information" in the books complicate technocratic proposals for a utopia of universally accessible knowledge. What emerges is an argument for the inseparability of matter and meaning, fusing the discussion of knowledge with ontological, ethical, and aesthetic issues.

LP: Where does the title *ScanOps* come from?

ANW: It's the departmental name for Google's onsite book-scanning operations at their headquarters in Mountain View, California—I'm pretty sure the name was never public—I found it searching around Google's Intranet. When I worked as a video editor and videographer at Google, I started to document and talk to the ScanOps employees, but was fired rather quickly for this. At some point I heard about the "accidents" that occur in Google's book scanning operations.

The work of the ScanOps employees is an interesting hybrid—it is a labor of digitizing informational and cultural materials that requires no cognitive work over the content of those materials. The labor process is quite Fordist—press button, turn page, repeat.

The workers compose part of the photographic apparatus, which, conceived in a broad sense includes not only the machinery, but the social systems within which photography operates. The anonymous workers, electrons, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the pink finger condoms, infrared cameras, the auto-correction software, the capital required to fund the project, the ink on my rag paper prints, me—we're all in it. It's not a dematerialized image world.

LP: Can you elaborate on the process of how *ScanOps* work is made?

ANW: My strengths in making photographs are aesthetic and cognitive—cultural labor. Each stop along the way involves machines and humans, and I weave them all together with my bike or a borrowed car, my phone, and my laptop. It allows for the work to be made. Critique, aestheticization, and inhabiting contemporary modes of production, all co-exist throughout the work. And that is where I want all of my work to be—participating in a living, involuted, expansive process. I try to locate strategies that inherently underscore the fact that we are complicit in and responsible for our social and technological arrangements, to dispel the notion that we are passively impacted by foreign objects and natural systems.

LP: Take us through the steps in your work's production, the logic of each decision.

ANW: Production starts before me. The books are shipped from libraries to be photographed at Google Books facilities or photographed at the library. Software auto-corrects and converts the images and uploads them online. I browse for images that fulfill my criteria, download them, convert the pages I want, and edit out the Google watermark. No resizing or additional editing.

Next I have them inkjet printed to scale, they are mounted and sent to the framers, who make a custom frame for each print. Then I bring the prints to Home Depot, and pick a color on each print for them to match with their color-matching apparatus. They make paint in that color and I bring the paint to an auto body shop, where the frames are sprayed in their respective colors. A whole just-in-time production line.

Essentially I'm choosing materials and various subcontracted production processes that allow for the materiality of the work to be emphasized. There are also pre-existing conditions that communicate that for me, and so I make the choice to leave them be; for instance, leaving the images at their original size keeps them in direct correlation to the printed matter they came from. In a gallery or on the page of a magazine each work occupies a unique volume of space, and so when put together their spatial/sculptural qualities are emphasized. What I'm after are traces of materiality.

LP: It's compelling to think of *ScanOps* as a kind of update to the tradition of documentary photography, but for the online image. What do you think about this characterization?

ANW: In addition to the work engaging photography's materiality and an interest in the abstraction that the anomalies can present, I like to think of each image—whether it contains accidents or not—as a view of the world. They're both medium-specific and indexical. They reveal traces of the humans and technology that produced them.

There's an unavoidable comparison to the strands of documentary photography within which Dorothea Lange, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and so on operated through—a socially engaged, journalistic photography that represents marginalized populations, and in particular their labor.

LP: We most often encounter digital recordings of books as scans but you are intent on referring to these as photographs—why, and who are the photographers here?

ANW: Mass market books can be sliced open and fed into scanners, but the books I'm looking at come from library collections and need to be photographed with a camera from above. The fingers we see could mistakenly be called the photographers' hands, but due to the scripting of their actions by superiors at Google, they are camera operators. The photographers are Sergey Brin and Larry Page, who proposed the digitization of all the world's books when Google was just a fledgling startup. Because the complete copying of an entire book violates copyright, the photographers have been faced with lawsuits from the Authors Guild, the Association of American Publishers, and more.

Google is in the sole possession of the means of search and distribution for most of the books published in the United States in the 20th century. For the first time, elements of

public library collections are offered for sale through a private contractor, with additional revenue coming in from the ad space for sale next to the online books.

Everyone who uses Gmail, Google Docs, Google Books, Blogger, YouTube, etc becomes a knowledge worker for the company. We're performing freestyle data entry. Where knowledge is perceived as a public good, Google gathers its income from the exchange of information and knowledge, creating additional value in this process. Google, as we know it and use it, is a factory.

Andrew Norman Wilson currently lives and works in New York. He is a 2011 recipient of the Dedalus Foundation MFA fellowship and the Edward Ryerson Fellowship. He has participated in residencies at the Headlands Center for the Arts and the Banff Center, and will be an upcoming resident at Akademie Schloss Solitude. His work has been presented at the Images Festival in Toronto, the San Francisco International Film Festival for a Golden Gate Award, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the De Young Museum in San Francisco, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the Eastern Bloc Center in Montreal, Yaffo 23 in Jerusalem, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Parsons, UCLA, and Reed College. His work has been featured in *Artforum*, *Aperture Magazine*, *Rhizome*, *Buzzfeed*, and more. www.andrewnormanwilson.com