

# Spike Island

PRESS RELEASE

JAMES N. KIENITZ WILKINS

*THIS ACTION LIES*

6 July to 8 September 2019

Preview: Friday 5 July, 6–9pm



Spike Island presents *This Action Lies*, a solo exhibition by Brooklyn-based artist James N. Kienitz Wilkins.

Kienitz Wilkins's moving image work combines documentary sources with original scriptwriting to investigate the role that narrative plays in the construction of truth. Characterised by an economy of means, his films engage with issues that relate directly to his personal life: from social relations in his native New England to labour conditions in the digital age. The results are both funny – full of wordplay, wisecracks and ideas collapsing in upon other ideas – and provocative – peppered with matter-of-fact observations and fragments of uncomfortable truth.

The exhibition features *This Action Lies* (2018), a thirty-minute film about the limits of observation, or about staring very hard at something while listening to something else. Framed as an apology, the fast-paced monologue that echoes throughout analyses the common and underappreciated commercial product on view: a Dunkin' Donuts foam coffee cup.

The 'action' of the work's title refers to cinema itself as a continuous action or sequence of actions, rather than the action, or lack of it, that it captures. In material terms, the projected video is made up of a digital scan of three reels of black and white 16mm film intercut in sequence. No frame is repeated, with each shot comprising a 10-minute-long closeup of a cup of coffee cooling down on a pedestal. In this way, Kienitz Wilkins embeds a key trope of durational, observational documentary cinema – looking closely at objects or people for a long time to reveal something that may



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not be seen otherwise – in a movie that sounds as though it carries the opposite intent.

Like many of Kienitz Wilkins's existing works, the film also questions the veracity of cinema to the extent that the accuracy of the artist's own voiceover is constantly put in doubt. This becomes clear, for example, in the discussion of 'genericide' with which the video ends: a legal term for the process by which a brand name or trademark is transformed through popular usage into a common noun. By this point we already know that the Dunkin' Donuts coffee cup we are staring at is not in fact from Dunkin' Donuts, but was bought directly from the supplier. And the word 'styrofoam', used casually by the narrator, is both a classic case of genericide and a misnomer, since Styrofoam™ is a brand name for 'extruded' polystyrene foam rather than the 'expanded' foam used for food products. This destabilises the artist's authority at the same time as supporting his thesis, causing the work to hold – and seemingly to insist on holding – this and other contradictions together in tension.

The same is true when Kienitz Wilkins makes an awkward reference to his own 'brand' at the start of the film, or googles the email address of the MoMA curator that he schemes on trying to sell the film to eventually. Pacing through these and other admissions, questions and contradictions, the forward momentum of the quick-witted monologue never quite give us the time we need to take it all in and think it all through. There is however a short period of respite midway through, when Kienitz Wilkins gets up from his computer to tend to his new-born baby and a J.S. Bach harpsichord fugue begins to play like a lullaby. At the same time, the film transitions temporarily from digitally-scanned but otherwise unedited 16mm footage to a mesmeric kind of frame-by-frame animation. And here we catch a glimpse of the artist's recent change of circumstances – becoming a father – in a scene that gives an 'authentic' biographical slant the documentary impulse that is repeatedly demonstrated and undermined throughout the film.

Image: James N. Kienitz Wilkins *This Action Lies* (2018) Film still. United States / Switzerland, digital video, black and white, sound, 32 minutes.

– Ends –

For further information and high-resolution images please contact Jane Faram, Communications Manager at Spike Island on [jane.faram@spikeisland.org.uk](mailto:jane.faram@spikeisland.org.uk) or +44 (0)117 9292266.

Notes for editors:

- *This Action Lies* was produced by the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève for the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement 2018, with the support from the Fonds d'Art Contemporain de la Ville (FMAC), the Fonds d'Art Contemporain du Canton de Genève (FCAC) and In Between Art Film.
- James N. Kienitz Wilkins is a filmmaker and artist based in Brooklyn, New York His work has screened at the New York Film Festival, Toronto, Locarno, Rotterdam, Migrating Forms, Ann Arbor, CPH:DOX, MoMA PS1, BAMcinemaFest, Images, and beyond. In 2016, he was awarded the Kazuko Trust Award presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. In 2017, he was included in the Whitney Biennial, and a retrospective of his work was showcased at Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montreal (RIDM). In 2018, he premiered new work in a solo show at Gasworks

(London) and the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement (Geneva). He is a graduate of the Cooper Union School of Art in New York City.

- Spike Island is an international centre for the development of contemporary art and design, located close to Bristol's harbourside. It is a place where artists and the public can meet, enabling audiences to engage with artists' research and production. Within the 80,000 square foot building, Spike Island offers visitors a year-round programme of exhibitions, events and activities in the central gallery spaces, as well as providing working space for artists, designers and creative businesses.
- Spike Island is a partner of Tate as part of the Plus Tate network.
- The gallery is open Tuesday to Sunday, 12–5pm. Entrance is free.



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