

Peer Review/

Volume II

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Joseph Wilcox. *In Search of Martin Klein* (still) (2017)
Digital video. 00:18:43

Joseph Wilcox

by Mira Dayal

The conspiracy began with a benign photograph of a brick wall. Some of the depicted bricks ran horizontally across the photo's edges, while the middle bricks marched vertically. In the center of the photo, hastily applied white mortar emphasizes a cross-like formation of five bricks. All of this could seem meaningless, but in the context of Joseph Wilcox's 2017 video and exhibition at the Chicago Artists Coalition, both titled *In Search of Martin Klein*, this image is at the core of a conspiracy.

In Search of Martin Klein

"Hitting a wall" is an expression of frustration, reaching a limit that cannot be surpassed. Similarly, the idiom "brick by brick" conjures a slow process of construction. Both phrases are useful in understanding the video *In Search of Martin Klein*. To create the video, Wilcox constructed images and documents supposedly linking his Klein character to a variety of people, places, and things throughout history, including an invented SEO-boosting company with a logo resembling the brick formation, a YouTube conspiracy video suggesting the CIA's involvement in punk rock, and a Photoshopped picture of Allen Ginsburg hanging out with Lee Krasner and Tupac Shakur. Some of these materials then became a new series of photographs and physical objects, such as a brick sculpture

resembling the mortar-outlined arrangement in the photograph. Assembled together in physical space, these objects and images initially read as part of an idiosyncratic archival display in a history museum. But against the conventions of those spaces, Wilcox did not include didactic wall text connecting the disparate elements; only the video purported to explain the intentionally convoluted connections.

The video is narrated by an unseen man whose voice is somewhat garbled, perhaps even machine-generated. As short video clips, scanned documents, scrolling search results, and cropped screenshots flash on the screen, the narrator describes his interest in a person he found via a conspiracy forum by the nondescript name of “Martin Klein.” “Out of habit, I began archiving everything he posted in case the content was deleted,” he says. “I’m glad I did, because there is no trace of him on the internet anymore.” Thus we begin with two partly absent characters, neither of whom seem trustworthy, but both of whom seem driven by a desire to identify patterns that add up to some larger truth—about the relationship between punk rock and the CIA for Klein, or about the life and disappearance of Klein for the narrator.

The longer the video goes on, the more the narrator’s voice distorts, and the more it becomes clear that Wilcox does not believe in his own conspiracy. At a moment when a keystone of meaning is about to be revealed, the video cuts to a black-and-white surveillance-style video of a man—possibly the artist, the exposed narrator?—holding a spatula in a kitchen, watching eggs fry in a pan.

Wilcox has been interested in tracking the increasing power and visibility of conspiracies across the twenty-first century, from 9/11 to the 2016 election. For Wilcox, the labor of constructing a conspiracy is a self-aware absurdity. That labor allows him to transform the format of the conspiracy into a DIY engine for a body of work. It's a way of jumping from input to object to input to object, embracing while ridiculing the idea of unearthing buried narratives. His results sit somewhere among the secrets of Sophie Calle, the spy intel of Forensic Architecture, and the dryly critical art tips of Hennessey Youngman. But more simply, his work reflects the very process by which many artists make meaning: They welcome strained and unexpected connections, often including political references, as a means of arriving at different modes of understanding, or even escape.

Nobody Wants to Fix Things Anymore

An outsider protagonist who yearns to connect and problem-solve resurfaces in one of Wilcox's more recent videos, the four-minute long *Nobody Wants to Fix Things Anymore* (2023). Here the unnamed narrator is perhaps middle-aged or older, wearing lopsided glasses and a yellow-and-white striped collared shirt. His voice is clearly machine-spoken, resembling that of an outdated GPS guide. As he begins to talk, his image floats across the screen and distorts into a proto-deepfake animation. "Nobody wants to fix things anymore," he laments. "I'm not talking about societal ills or whatever. I'm talking about literal, real things, like a shelf, or a

shoe, or a chair. But I guess while I'm at it, I am talking about societal ills or whatever too.... Good for the goose, good for the gander kinda situation."

The figure in Wilcox's video goes on to describe himself as a "fixer" who has become wealthy, though partially injured, following an accident payout from a car crash caused by a driver who hadn't fixed his brakes. He now spends his time implementing small repairs around his urban neighborhood; however, these "fixes" are unauthorized and likely unappreciated. Just over a minute into introducing himself in the video, this man tells us about "the most beautiful bench" he's ever seen, one with a broken leg that had been propped up by a rock by some stranger to make it functional again. The video shows surveillance-style footage and potentially Photoshopped images of the metal bench in question located near a busy street intersection and piles of garbage bags. He describes the stranger who placed the rock there as a "kindred spirit" who he spent years trying to find. When that effort failed, this humble fixer decided to settle for getting to know the rock instead. After replacing it with a different rock, he describes bringing the heavy object with him "way out east, way out west," and the imagery transitions to handheld-camera footage taken on a walk through a lush forest. "I've got no use for fixes now," he says, in a rhyming set of lines that close out the video.

If we take this character to be a partial stand-in for Wilcox (as he indicated in a conversation), or for the figure of "the artist" more generally, this ending suggests disillusionment. The

artist's mode of proposing solutions via real objects has the potential to translate into solutions for the real world—"good for the goose, good for the gander." But when these efforts go underrecognized, the artist ends up bringing their special objects somewhere else, removed from the expectation of contributing to a larger world—or perhaps to a place where a rock is a rock, and art is art.

Within the trajectory of Wilcox's practice, this reading might seem accurate: In 2020, he was making large toner prints of stills from protest videos that could be folded up and hung in a window or brought to another protest. His practice is grounded in zines, inexpensive materials, and accessible price points for art, demonstrating a dedication to a dialogue between studio creation and societal ills.

And yet, we have a sense that Wilcox both identifies with and disapproves of his narrators. This tension is what makes his work tick. *Nobody Wants to Fix Things Anymore* was inspired by Wilcox's actual encounter with a broken, rock-propped bench. But while the endearingly dejected protagonist of the video responds to the encounter by yearning for connection and retreating with the object of fascination, Wilcox used the encounter as fuel for new creations—including, of course, this odd virtual character and story, as well as a real cardboard version of the bench and exuberantly patterned digital versions of the rock. In both this video and *In Search of Martin Klein*, Wilcox seems attuned to a societal pulse of desperation and frustration as much as pleasure and yearning, which infuses

his scripts' cynicism with knowing humor. Wilcox's practice ultimately feels like a search engine or social lab, a place to study the persistent human desire to make objects, meaning, and change—brick by brick.

Thank you.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Alexandra Hammond, Corinna Kirsch, Danyel Ferrari, Julia Baron and Robert Silva for once again giving their patience, intelligence and talent to this project. Lastly, thank you to all the artists who agreed to participate in this project. We truly hope you had, overall, a good experience and learned from each other. Even after the second time around, we certainly learned so much more.

Respectfully yours,
Kat & Priscilla.