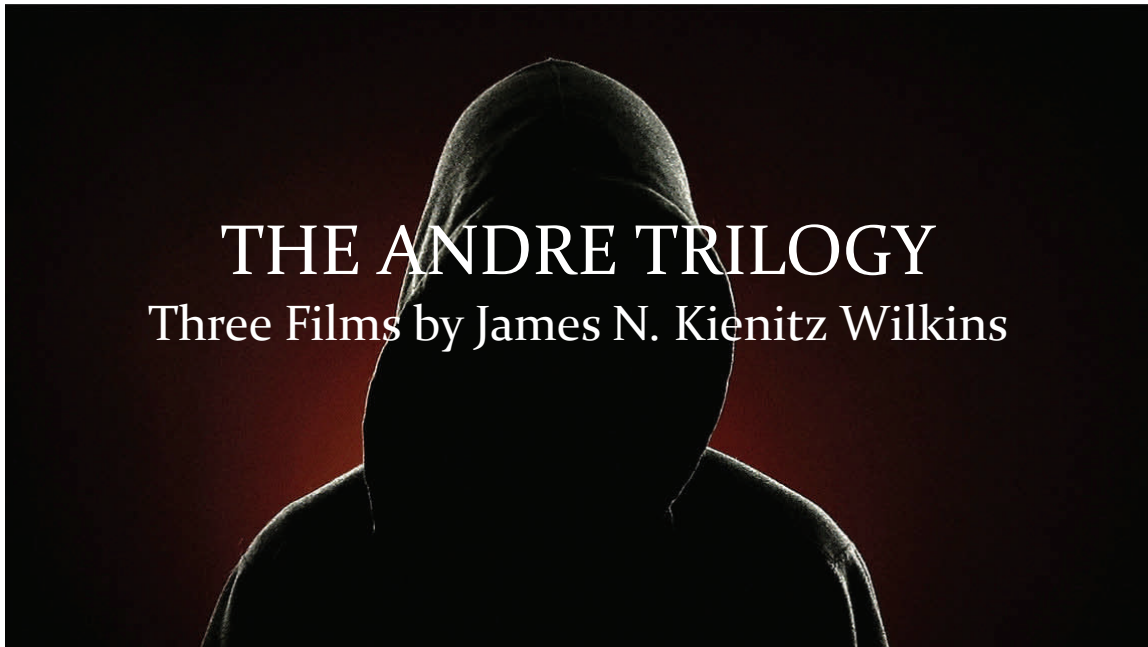


Acropolis Cinema and Los Angeles Filmforum
present



April 29, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

One of most exciting and unpredictable filmmakers working today, Brooklyn's James N. Kienitz Wilkins (*Indefinite Pitch*, Locarno Festival in Los Angeles 2017) has made a name for himself over the last half-decade with an idiosyncratic collection of works that foreground language and performance while simultaneously upending expected formal boundaries. Tonight's program features the Los Angeles premiere of the Andre Trilogy, three films that helped establish Wilkins' playfully provocative, self-reflexive sensibility. Films include: *Special Features* (2014, 12 min), *TESTER* (2015, 30 min), *B-ROLL with Andre* (2015, 19 min). Total running time: 61 min.

American Landscape by Nick Pinkerton

The following article was originally published by frieze, March 22, 2017

It one of those roll-the-dice, fill-a-couple-of-hours festival screenings that usually end tragically. My first encounter with James N. Kienitz Wilkins's work came in September of 2013, in the basement of the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, where I caught a screening of his debut feature, *Public Hearing* (2012). It was playing as part of a documentary film festival located in nearby Camden. I went in knowing nothing more than what I'd read in the catalogue copy, which sounded like a parody of one of Frederick Wiseman's obsessive descriptions of institutional minutiae: "... The verbatim re-performance of a rural American town meeting from a transcript downloaded as publicly available information. Shot entirely in cinematic close-up on black-and-white 16mm film ..." After 110 minutes watching a procession of performers operating at wildly different levels of experience and 'believability,' all shot in austere close-ups, discussing the pros and cons of allowing an existing Walmart in the small western New York town of Allegany to expand into a Super Walmart, I was still a little unclear on what exactly *Public Hearing* was. Yet afterwards Wilkins gave one of those rare Q&As that actually makes a movie seem more rather than less interesting, and the film wound up lingering with me after everything else I saw on that long weekend had faded from memory.

The 33-year old Wilkins's name is less well known than that of some of his stablemates in the film section of the 2017 Whitney Biennial, which opened on 17 March at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (the programme also includes work by Kevin Jerome Everson, Eric Baudelaire, and Robert Beavers), but he's come a long way from that basement in Rockland. In 2016 Wilkins was announced as recipient of the Kazuko Trust Award, annually granted to a figure in the experimental film world, and the week before the Whitney screens two of Wilkins's shorts, *B-ROLL with Andre* (2015) and *Mediums* (2017) on 1 and 2 April, his second feature work, *Common Carrier* (2017), will premiere at the CPH:DOX festival in Copenhagen.

I'm still not sure that I've figured out what Wilkins is up to, though I know a little more about him than I did that afternoon in Maine. For example, I now know that he's a graduate of the Cooper Union School of Art, where he turned classmate and future filmmaker Gabriel Abrantes onto shooting on 16mm, and I know that the Rockland screening wasn't so far from the director's home turf, the twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn, Maine. Wilkins discusses Lewiston-Auburn at some length in the narration to his 2016 short *Indefinite Pitch*. The film comprises 23 minutes of black-and-white photographic images of the scummy surface of the Androscoggin River, accompanied by a free-ranging monologue on the history of those cities and their relation upriver, Berlin, New Hampshire, with digressions into the production history of the lost 1927 film *The Masked Menace*, the racially-charged pronouncements of Maine Governor Paul LePage, and recent local spikes in arson, heroin use, and white supremacist organization membership. Wilkins's discourse has a hotlinked kind of freedom of motion, making sharp lateral cuts from topic to topic, underpinned by one-click Wikipedia wisdom, and he clearly enjoys finding connective tissue through little rhymes and bits of wordplay.

For instance, in the case of *Indefinite Pitch*, the multiple meanings of the word 'pitch': downward slope, pre-selling a film, chucking a softball, and acoustics. (The pitch of the voice-over recording is being futzed with throughout.)

This mode of monologue-as-extended-riff recurs through Wilkins's filmography. In *TESTER* (2015), he lays a hard-boiled gumshoe rap over a bed of found footage on cruddy BetaSP home video, while in *B-Roll with Andre*, forming two-thirds of a trilogy with *TESTER*, we have a narrator who speaks in many voices from a face lost in shadow, proposing among other things a prospective art heist film, to be titled *eBoyz*. Wilkins's familiar authorial voice recurs in many different registers throughout a still-slender body of work marked by stylistic promiscuity, trying on and disposing of different approaches. Of the films made since *Public Hearing*, *Mediums* comes nearest to returning to that first feature's style, once again centred around civic process. In this case it's a roundelay of exchanges between potential jurors and functionaries taking place outside of a courthouse during the process of voir dire, casual conversation on the court steps developing into a kind of improvised bartering, as a group of (mostly) strangers exchange information in their individual areas of expertise – franchise law, the Volkswagon Passat, the SAG-AFTRA constitution – all delivered in a patois of precise, practiced jargon lifted from online sources, staged before photorealistic backdrops that give the proceedings a touch of the uncanny. Rather than alienating and cerebral, however, the film is humane and even quite moving by virtue of the community theatre performances and its peculiar democratic vision, reimagining online exchange as an IRL marketplace of ideas. Again, the result something like Wiseman in the fascination with scouring fine print, though *Mediums* replaces documentary observation with the deliberate artifice of clunky line-readings and false backdrops, or like Straub-Huillet if they operated in the confines of a studio and worked from banal found texts instead of Bertolt Brecht and Franz Kafka – which is to say, it's not much like either of those things.

Amidst Wilkins's zigging and zagging, certain patterns stand out. Despite holding a Brooklyn address, he remains a regionalist who has staked the upper northeast as his territory, his identity as a New Englander going some ways towards explaining the preponderance of Dunkin' Donuts references in his films – Wilkins returns to the Dunkin' Donuts logo like Robert Bresson does to doorways. This regional specificity is married to a fixation on a contemporary American blandscape that bulldozes vernacular peculiarities and leaves in their place the same big box stores and the same chain restaurants that are the exact same on every highway exit from sea to shining sea. The names of corporate entities recur chorus-like through his films – Walmart through *Public Hearing*, Panera Bread through *TESTER*, Burgess BioPower through *Indefinite Pitch*, FedEx, Verizon, and Amazon Studios through *Common Carrier* – and his own production company has the gray, impersonal-sounding sobriquet Automatic Moving Co.

While a New Englander born, Wilkins shares the same secondary residence that we all do as part-time citizens of the Web 2.0. His films have a common provenance in Internet archaeology: *Public Hearing's* script originated as a PDF file of a transcript of a 2006 meeting in Allegany; *Mediums* concludes with a URL-rich list of cited sources from which dialogue is lifted in toto. The Internet 'deep dive' is a standard element of new media art but Wilkins's practice is rooted in the avant garde film tradition, emphasis on 'film.' While addressing a modern world shaped by digital culture, Wilkins still has a stake in analogue technology, shooting on 16mm as recently as *Mediums*, and dropping in little jibes when he can't – both *Indefinite Pitch* and *Common Carrier* contain desultory, side-eye references to DCP (Digital Cinema Package) as 'what they show movies on nowadays.'

All of this is by way of saying that Wilkins, like most any artist worthy of the name, makes room in his work for multiple and even directly conflicting ideas to bounce off one another, something that's reflected in the basic conception of *Common Carrier*. The film is a collection of vignettes and conversations with various full-time and part-time artists, several of these featuring Wilkins himself, consisting almost entirely of two 'overlapped' images –sometimes simultaneously comprising both sides of a shot / reverse-shot setup, sometimes corresponding so closely as to register only as a slight wavering, other times entirely disparate.

The dialogue vies on the soundtrack with two radio feeds slipping in and out, one from New York N-

-ational Public Radio affiliate WNYC, the other cuts from hip-hop station Hot 97, in many of which the word 'work' recurs: Rihanna's 'Work, work, work, work, work' and 'All this all work, no vacation,' Young Greatness's 'Standin' in the kitchen I whip up that work,' and so on. Several possible thematic explanations for the layered images are suggested in the dialogues, which touch on schizophrenia, mystical 'aura,' even-handed constitutional law, and the division of labour hours, as *Common Carrier* continues Wilkins's interest in characters who moonlight: Brandon D'Augustine, the star of Wilkins's 16mm short *Occupations* (2015), is an actor who works as a physical therapist, while the cast of *Mediums* is full of amateurs of one kind or another. Doubled on screen, the film's cast also divide their time: there's a gallerist who sidelines as a draftsman, a freelance 'urban shaman,' an art handler/actor, and a father and aspiring screenwriter working on a horror-as-metaphor movie pitch about a malevolent force called the 'Jibber-Jabber,' an avatar for 'a tsunami of misplaced, useless information washing away all sense and reason.'

By virtue of its alluring density the film holds onto you moment-to-moment, even if it's not immediately obvious what all of its component parts are there for. Wilkins has a way of casually laying out all sorts of disparate bits of ephemera as though he's just woolgathering, and then suddenly pulling everything together in a snap – in *Common Carrier* it happens in a piece of double-barrelled montage set to Young M.A.'s 'Oh My Gawdd' freestyle that's so virtuosic that I swear to God I fist pumped while alone in my apartment watching the Vimeo link. This doesn't happen too often.

Without struggling to assert relevance, *Common Carrier* feels absolutely of-the-moment in its concern with making do, eking out a creative existence in the free time left after other obligations have been met. The dramatic crux of the movie, if you want to call it that, is Wilkins's worrying over a USB thumb drive containing a DCP file that's been mislaid by FedEx, and he loves to pepper his films with wry asides on the exigencies of being a gigging festival circuit filmmaker. For example, commenting on the eventual fate of his short *Special Features* (2014) within the film itself, he says 'Maybe I'll show it in France. French people love black people, they love to study them.' The mixed-race son of lily-white Maine, Wilkins makes race the subject of some of his most incisive asides, as in his observation in *Indefinite Pitch*: 'Whenever I meet someone I'm like, "Yeah, you're racist." That's the history of the world, that's nothing new. It's just a matter of containment and self-expression.'

That same film contains a disposition on the 'New England still face,' defined as 'a controlled self-possession rooted in the puritanical origins of colonial America.' While experimental filmmakers aren't necessarily thought of as laugh riots, Wilkins, along with ex-classmate Abrantes, is among the funniest working today, and that still face has something to do with it. Wilkins's comic style can be placed in a Yankee deadpan tradition that can be traced back to another son of Maine, Artemus Ward – the *nom-de-plume* of mid-19th century humourist Charles Farrar Browne – but in the heady mixture of Fetty Wap, Grecian urns, Justin Timberlake, Oculus Rift VR headsets, and votive statuary that opens *Common Carrier*, there's something completely modern, something that speaks to 2016 in a way that Jean-Luc Godard's juxtaposition of chrome, Cadillacs, and J.S. Bach might have spoken to prosperous Western Europe in the 1960s. His extant films are themselves littered with lost films – those that were made and disappeared, like *The Masked Menace*; literally lost DCPs; and ideas that will never be realized, such as *eBoyz* and the story of the Jibber-Jabber. Movies within movies and ideas on top of ideas – all adding to the extraordinary thickness of Wilkins's lavishly layered, restless work, likely already on the way to turning into something else entirely. ♦

Coming Soon to Acropolis:

- *The Nothing Factory* (Dir. by Pedro Pinho)—May 9, Downtown Independent

- *Dust in the Wind: 8 Films* by Michael Robinson—May 29, Downtown Independent



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AcropolisCinema@gmail.com

www.acropoliscinema.com