

frieze

T.J. Wilcox talks to *Kirsty Bell* about his latest video project, *In the Air*, which opens at the Whitney Museum in September

Sunrise to Sunset

Visitors to T.J. Wilcox's studio on Union Square, New York, must take the elevator to the building's 16th storey, climb another flight of steps to the floor above, and pass through a narrow lobby to a door with a lion's head doorknocker. On entering, you find yourself in a set of small rooms, which offer extraordinary views in every direction of the city below. This studio, which Wilcox moved into in 2012, having migrated from room to room on the floors below, provided the inspiration for *In the Air*, an ambitious new video work which will premiere at the Whitney Museum of American Art in September. The video presents a panoramic view of Manhattan filmed from Wilcox's rooftop, along with six vignettes that describe a handful of the events, individuals and historical moments that make up the city's ever-evolving mythology. The films, which play in turn, focus on the Empire State Building as well as figures such as Andy Warhol (whose Factory was a mere stone's throw from Wilcox's studio), the proto-celebrity Gloria Vanderbilt, 1980s fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez, and John, the superintendent of Wilcox's studio building. The sequence ends with a view of the sun setting over the city at the spring-summer equinox, an event that has been dubbed 'Manhattanhenge'. *In the Air* presents a composite portrait of the city through the eyes of an artist who has never lost his infatuation with it.

KIRSTY BELL

How did this studio, with its bird's-eye view over Manhattan, come to inspire In the Air?

T.J. WILCOX

I've always been interested in the role that the studio plays in the production of art. It is often forgotten, but in many ways it conditions the works of art that emerge. My studio is a series of structures that have been cobbled together over the decades. There are so many windows and skylights that it is like a viewing platform, but no two windows are the same, and so each view is framed in its own idiosyncratic way. It was an extraordinary opportunity for me – as someone who works with film and video, and is always filming and looking at things – to be in a building that is defined not by its walls and architecture but by the limitlessness of the views from it.

KB *It's like being inside an eye.*

TW It really is. It was so obvious, I had to take it on: you need to cultivate these sorts of accidents. Years ago I never had huge budgets or studio helpers, or the structure of a film studio, and I thought I would see what kinds of movies you could make using a different model. I had to take advantage of whatever I had, sometimes that was as straightforward as a great voice. I met a woman in Germany and she had the most extraordinary voice, like Marlene Dietrich both in English and in German, which inspired me to make the film *The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich* (1999).

KB *So practical factors can have a determining influence on the films that you make?*

TW Exactly, and in this case it happened to be this crazy view. After a few weeks spent just staring out of the window, I started to notice how, whenever I looked in a particular direction, I would recall a personal anecdote, as if I were seeing across time. I could look down Union Square and remember a fantastic protest or a date that went horribly wrong, or a character from a novel or a moment from a film.

KB *So the view became like an historical collage for you?*

TW It becomes more a set piece, a location. New York City generally, while being this living, breathing place, is also so mythologized, with many different histories, whether political or cinematic. The whole city functions the way the Empire State Building did for Warhol – as a movie star in its own right. You just need to point the camera at it. Moving through the streets of Manhattan, everyone is like a filmmaker

assembling a series of associations and memories, simultaneous with the experience of the city in real time.

KB *How did these thoughts develop into an idea for a work?*

TW I had recently read about this form of lens, which is essentially a mirror that allows you to film a view in the round with one take. It faces directly towards the sky and has an attachment standing several inches off the top to create a kind of convex mirror. By photographing this mirror image, the camera is able to record simultaneously, within the rectangular frame of the video, a 360-degree view from wherever it is fixed. Then there's software that takes this round image, cuts it and straightens it out. You end up with one very long, wide frame that presents the full view in the round.

KB *This piece relies on the most up-to-date digital technology, whereas your earlier works almost exclusively used film.*

TW One of the reasons I used film in the beginning was simply because it was a far superior recording media than digital video was at that time.

KB *It wasn't necessarily nostalgic?*

TW It had that aspect, but it was also because everything that used those early video cameras had a kind of reportage look, and my work was not about that. Every one of these media – not just 35mm versus digital, but also Super-8, mobile phones, the first digital camera you had, 16mm, your Playskool camera – takes a different kind of picture. They're all nuanced ways of looking that the viewer understands and recognizes: we know that 16mm or 8mm, for example, is made by one person with a camera, or how footage from a mobile phone looks. The way we read film was much more complicated than video at the time I was starting out; I could achieve a palette that was specific to my own work.

KB *Again, this is very much a pragmatic approach ...*

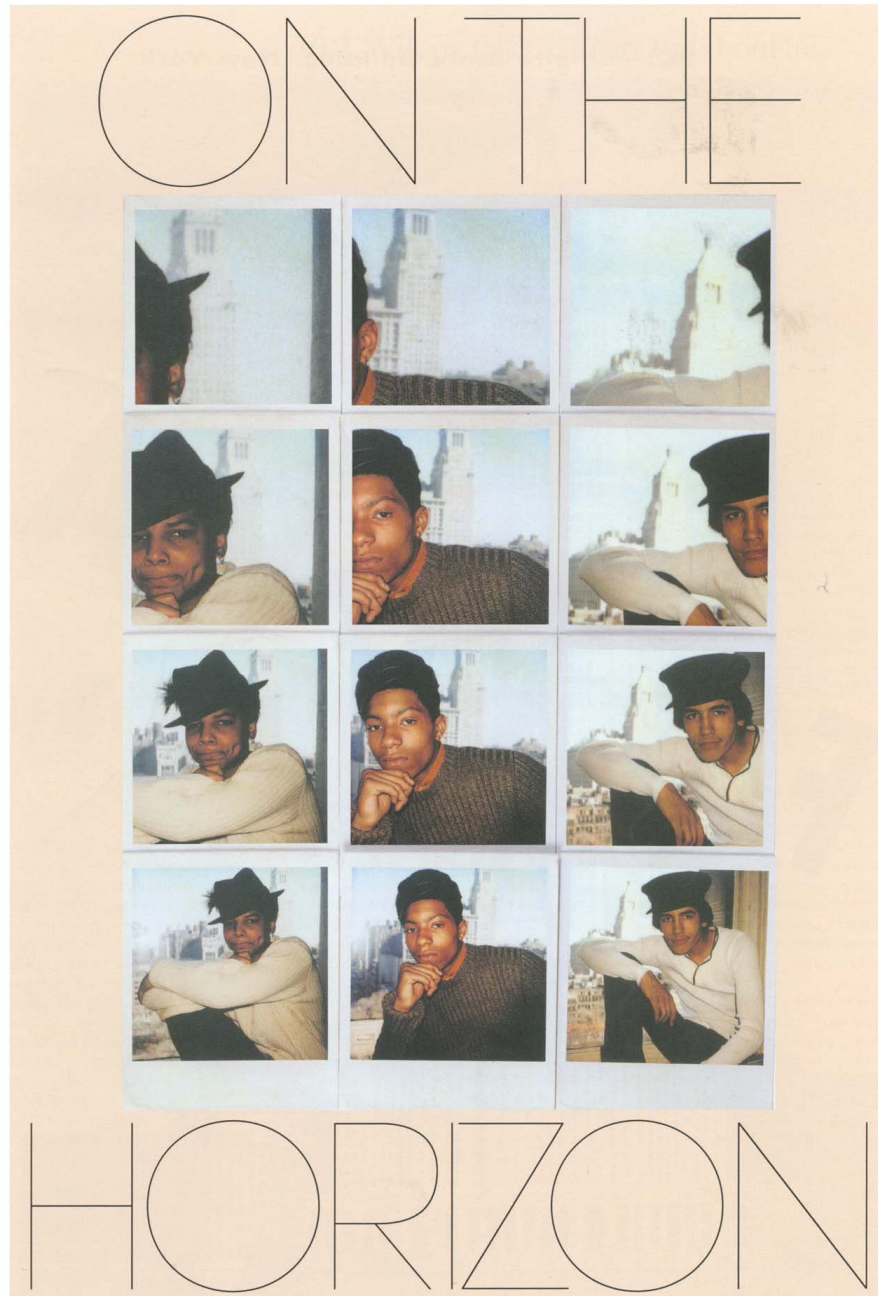
TW As annoying and complicated as they can be, these constraints can also generate interesting things. When I was making films in the mid-1990s there was no Final Cut Pro, so all editing was done using Avid, which was much more complicated.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Movie Poster for 'Futura'
One of the films that make up the panoramic video
installation *In the Air*, 2013, mixed media,
102 x 69 cm

GLADSTONE GALLERY



1
Movie Poster for 'On the Horizon' (one of the films that
make up the panoramic video installation *In the Air*), 2013, mixed media,
102 x 69 cm

2-4
Stills from *In the Air*, 2013, ten-channel panoramic
video installation

GLADSTONE GALLERY

KB *You were dependent on the technician who knew how to use it.*

TW Yes, in those days I was also shooting almost exclusively on Super-8, but I would transfer the film to digital media and then edit that on Avid. I would have to have a complete edit of the films in my head, and then would go into television stations at 3am and pay a technician under the table to edit my films for me. The digital films, and then the digital edit, would be output to 16mm, and that's how I would show it. At each step along the way people would say: 'You're going to lose so much; you're going to get all this noise and the colours will change.' But, for me, I felt I was gaining something with each step.

KB *How did you go about documenting the view of New York from your studio?*

TW I decided to film an entire day from the roof of the studio, from sunrise to sunset, and show that in-the-round on a circular screen in time lapse; you see a whole day over the space of about half an hour. There are ten projectors in the centre of the room projecting out onto a curved screen, creating an image in the round. I made six short films that interrupt the larger 360-degree panorama, so each of the projectors also has a story of its own that relates to the section of the view that it normally shows as part of the panorama.

For example, the part of the view in which you see the Empire State Building also includes a story culled from archival footage and stop-motion animation about the building itself. The Empire State Building was designed to be a mooring mast for Zeppelins that had travelled across the Atlantic from Germany to the United States. By 1936, 200,000 people were making these transatlantic flights, travelling from Germany to New York in only two days: they were wildly popular. The Zeppelins represented every possible, positive, exciting idea about what was to come, this bright new future.

The problem was what to do with these huge aircraft, but as this was the era of Utopias, the architects thought: 'We're building this glamorous new structure: we'll tether the Zeppelin to the top of the Empire State Building. At 600 metres above the pavement, a gang plank will drop down, which will enable you to walk to the top of the Empire State Building. Once you've passed customs, you'll take an elevator down to 34th Street and Fifth Avenue, get in a taxi and be in New York.' They even calculated that it would take seven minutes to go from Zeppelin to taxi: it was brilliant, just fantastic.

However, it turned out to be very difficult to moor a Zeppelin to the top of a building, because the city acts like a canyon funneling air from the ground straight up the sides, which causes it to rock. So, they couldn't ever actually land there, not to mention disembark onto a gang plank. Then, in 1937, the *Hindenburg* disaster happened, which curtailed any further research into this notion.

KB *Are there voice-overs to the short films?*

TW Some have subtitles, but the entire project is silent. While one vignette is playing, the other projectors continue to show the Manhattan-scape around you. When it ends, the complete 360-degree view is resumed for two minutes before the next projector clockwise from the first tells a story of its own, relating to the direction in which it points, and so on until the different stories have been screened. By the time the last one is finishing, sunset is happening all around you.

'The Empire State Building was designed to be a mooring mast for Zeppelins that had travelled across the Atlantic.'



2



3



4

GLADSTONE GALLERY



1



2

The last film is about the phenomenon known as 'Manhattanhenge'. The streets of New York were laid out in such a precise east, west, north, south geometric grid that, at the spring and summer equinox, the sun sets perfectly at the end of all the east-west streets: the great ball of the sun seems to move between the two canyon walls of buildings and sinks right down between them. Eons from now, some future explorer could discover New York City and presume that, like the builders of Stonehenge, we worshipped the sun, and our streets were aligned this way because we wanted to see the sunset right at the end.

KB Do you see these six films as a history of the city or are they more personal?

TW They're quite personal really, but they do tell a history. Some are more specifically historical, like the ones about the Empire State Building or the fashion designer Antonio Lopez. He was a gifted fashion illustrator – which sounds archaic now, but one has to remember what role fashion illustration played in a world with fewer photographic and filmic images. Warhol, for example, came very much from that world and he was a great admirer of Lopez. They were great friends.

Lopez was from the Bronx originally, and he was the first person to draw women of colour. It's impossible to overstate how radical it was in the early 1960s to propose that African-American or Hispanic women could be part of the lexicon of beauty or the beauty industry. I started hearing about Lopez in 1983 or '84, when I was in high school, though he had been active since the early 1960s here in New York. About three or four months after I moved to the city, in 1986, Warhol died and, only a year later, Lopez died, like so many men of his generation, of AIDS. I couldn't believe how much death and loss greeted me the moment I came here. You always had the sense there was a continuum of generations in New York, each informing the next. For me, as a gay man moving to the city, I felt bereft of this amazing generation that had done so much and was suddenly absent.

Lopez was always interested in the latest thing on the streets, and in the early 1980s he started being inspired by all these hip-hop groups that were coming from the Bronx, from his old neighbourhood. They would come to the studio so he could draw them, and he would take a Polaroid, posing them near to a window to get some light. Not so long ago, I was in the studio looking at this new monograph about Lopez's work and these great pages of all these Polaroids. As I started to look at them, I realized that the view behind his models was exactly the view out of my studio window. It felt like a ghost had passed through the studio – I thought maybe he'd actually been working here. It turned out that he had been based in the building next door, so the view was almost identical. I suddenly had the feeling that all these people who had seemed to be absent are, in fact, still around.

1
T.J. Wilcox's studio, Union Square,
New York, 2013

2
Production still from
the making of *In the Air*, 2013

3
Still from *In the Air*,
2013, ten-channel panoramic
video installation

GLADSTONE GALLERY



'Moving through the streets of Manhattan, everyone is like a filmmaker assembling a series of associations and memories.'

KB *That synthesizes a lot of the ideas in your work, and a strain that runs through it, of history told through the cipher of biography.*

TW That's what history is: a set of supposed facts from which we pick and choose or make anecdotal use of in the montage that we replay for ourselves about who we are. I love that history is full of lies and that stories get a life of their own. Truth becomes very malleable and beside the point in some way.

KB *It must have been hard to narrow it down to just six stories.*

TW Yes, six from six million. These six stories occurred to me as I initially started looking at the view. I could have added 40 more. But the whole thing is a suggestion. For all the elaborate labour, I'm hoping that the ultimate effect will actually be light.

KB *The framework of it being one day makes exactly that suggestion: this is just one day, the next one could present a completely different set of thoughts. There is a complex sense of history within the six films: not only do you see the 24-hour passage from sunrise to sunset, but there is also a broader historical pan from the early 20th century to now, which takes in ideas about aviation and travel; celebrity, mediation and the icon; fashion, gay culture and identity. Is it conscious for you to also have this broader time span throughout the films and to touch on particular historical moments or themes?*

TW Probably. One of the really poignant things about seeing the studio for the first time was a comment by the building's superintendent, John. He always wears a shirt that says 'John', and he's such an everyman, a great New Yorker. When we got up here, he told me: 'I rarely come up here but, as luck would have it, or not, I was here working on the roof on 11 September 2001. I said to myself, that's so weird those planes are flying so low.' Then he went back to the task at hand and, a few seconds later, he saw the first impact, and then he was glued to the spot for the rest of the day. It was a very unusual day in that the weather was something we call here 'severe clear'.

KB *That's an astonishing pairing of words.*

TW It's a bizarre climactic description of a phenomenon that typically occurs in the autumn, after a storm. It's as if your vision has suddenly improved beyond anything you ever possessed. That was how we all saw 9/11. My principal studio windows are at the back looking south, so John would have had a direct view of the World Trade Center. What is no longer there has really characterized the view from the first day, which is such an impossible subject.

KB *But also hard to avoid if you're talking about the cityscape of Manhattan.*

TW I loved John's first-person narrative. Of course, these days it's not uncommon to be able to hear such an account, but John won't be here forever and, in the future, a first-person narrative of that most horrific day in New York City won't be so easily found. That's the eternal magic of film: John stands here on the

roof, with the view behind him now lacking the World Trade Center, and he describes matter-of-factly and, I find, very movingly, what he saw that day. It's very straightforward, real-time, somebody here and now.

KB *Your early films were very much about the exotic, distant and historical: a Francophile or oriental fantasy. Over the years, however, you've moved to focus on your everyday vantage point. Though there's not so much overt fantasy, there is still an idea of escapism, or the power of imaginative potential to make a life rich.*

TW I have a really *New Yorker*-cartoon view of the world: as far as I'm concerned, New York is still the centre of the earth – culturally, financially, politically – and Union Square is the new centre of that world, now that everything's shifted downtown. So I am at the centre, though that has nothing to do with me personally. Part of this project is about a summation: one day's summation of this place and this period and this vantage point. ♦♦

Kirsty Bell lives in Berlin, Germany, and is a writer and contributing editor of Frieze.

TJ Wilcox is an artist based in New York, USA. In 2012, he had a solo show at Lismore Castle Arts, Ireland, and he was included in group exhibitions at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France. His solo exhibition 'In the Air' will be at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from 19 September 2013 to 9 February 2014.