

MAP #23 12 Dec 2010
Conversation

Hans Ulrich Obrist interviews Emily Wardill



'Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck', 2007, 16mm film. Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist talks to Emily Wardill about her enigmatic film work

Hans Ulrich Obrist: *It's the first month, the 10th year, the first decade, the third millennium and we're in London — Deleuze wrote about repetition and difference...*

Emily Wardill: Yes, I was thinking about him, because I was thinking about windows.

Obrist: *Windows?*

Wardill: Throwing a body through a frame. You couldn't really throw yourself out of that window.

Obrist: *No, I couldn't throw myself out of the window. But why do you think about windows this morning?*

Wardill: Partly because I'm working on a catalogue at the moment and trying to organise everything under ideas of theatre and the object in the window, and I had heard that Deleuze, when he threw himself out of the window, did it because he was trying to get air into his lungs.

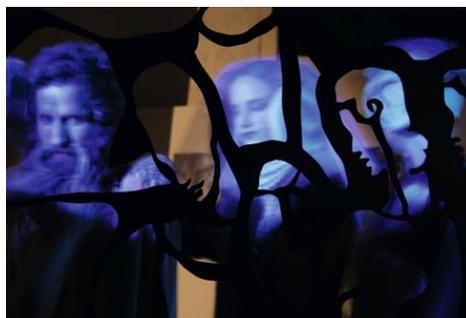
Obrist: *Christian Boltanski told me that in an artist's life there are a couple of inventions, great inventions, just as in a*

scientist's life. Benoît Mandelbrot still remembers the day he discovered fractals. When was the first time you had an awakening epiphany?

Wardill: I think art made sense of the feeling that some things make sense and some things don't. Maybe it was more accumulative than an epiphany.

Obrist: *Do you remember the first piece you were happy with?*

Wardill: I was really into editing and filmmaking — it was a performance piece (a re-enactment of Joris-Karl Huysmans' black dinner from *À rebours*, 1884), 'The Feast Against Nature', 2005. When I was making sense of that vast project — two years of trying to work out the voices and how they came together — I realised that something happens when you edit, you can make connections that are not expected. It was an important piece of work also because it was made as a collective.



'Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck', 2007, 16mm film. Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *So it was a performance in which, for the first time, things came together. What was your inspiration?*

Wardill: I remember being struck by Des Esseintes' temporary loss of virility and that this gigantic black feast would then be something ridiculous and grand at the same time. And also the idea of decadence — decadence in the sense of the late 19th century word, but also the American contemporary version of decadence, which relates to its original meaning — a kind of

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moral decay (in relation to Gary Indiana). It was just before Bush was re-elected, so that feeling was really present in people's minds in New York. In England this decadence came across as a much more romantic sort of dandy-esque embodiment.

Obrist: *And did you see a link to 'happenings'?*

Wardill: Yes, people had this pathological relationship to the thing they were talking about instead of having an academic one, and I think that that was something, as I understand the 'happenings', that happened to the participants; that you would kind of play through your roles, be it gender roles or societal structures.

Obrist: *Etel Adnan, the seminal poet and painter from Lebanon, says that identity is shifty, identity is a choice.*

Wardill: That you perform it? Yes, and also that you can have stories you hold onto, that you carry along with you as 'being', as opposed to being therapy which demands you search for answers and origins. Adam Phillips talks about this.

Obrist: *Cerith Wyn Evans was telling me the other day that when he was a student Peter Gidal told him to read Proust and Beckett and that had completely changed his life — have any books changed your life?*

Wardill: *A Fire On The Moon* by Norman Mailer. He was commissioned by the American government to write about the moon landing and it got really slated by the critics. So he took out an ad in the *New York Times* which published all the criticism from *Moby Dick* when that first came out. Hilarious. The thing I liked about it was it was constructed like *Moby Dick*, so it had this big sort of technological expansion in the middle of it, but also right in the beginning he puts himself in it. Even though it's about a grand world event, he's always there. He always places himself there so you have this thing that's both expansive and grounded in

autobiography — everything that is wrong with him, all his vices, all his insecurities and passions and posturing become part of this world event — when you hold a lens up to something it makes it big but you're aware of it being small and you're aware of the mechanics of that sort of magnification as well.



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video.
Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *Any other books which are oxygen?*

Wardill: I've been reading Carlo Ginzburg's essay 'Making It Strange' (from *Nine Reflections on Distance*). He's talking about Tolstoy's writing, which he wrote from the perspective of a horse, and this idea of changing perspective in order to point out how strange common sense is. And then, *Love is Colder than Death*, the Fassbinder book. I love where he talks about his films being like the walls of his house. So he never needs a house because he's constantly making films. That's his stability. The thing I like about it is that it can't just belong to him.

Obrist: *After that you made your first solo show, the legendary Reader's Wife at Fortescue Avenue.*

Wardill: *The Reader's Wife* was an expansion of the Smithsonian example of the boy running around in a sand pit that's half black sand and half white sand. If he runs around clockwise it turns grey and if he turns around anti-clockwise it doesn't go back into its two distinct halves. I was really interested in how that stage towards understanding could become a kind of

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theatrical stage and how you could then re-complicate it and make new connections from it. So in terms of fictionalising significant spaces, it was a kind of an epiphany. I'm using your word now. I'm not sure if I like the word.

Obrist: *What does London mean to you as a kind of context where you work?*

Wardill: I keep on getting out of London and then coming back and really liking it a lot more than when I left. But I think what's hard about London to leave is that it's full of people that I love and respect and it's full of a kind of energy which is special.

Obrist: *So cities are people?*

Wardill: Yeah, but when I went to Marseilles last year I really liked it better than any other city. That was a different thing, because in Marseilles it feels like everyone is outside and swarming around each other. The beaches in the city are all rocky with graffiti and people go swimming as the sun sets. Everyone is in on it — grandmas, kids, groups of teenagers playing guitar, army men, inflatable aeroplanes...



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video.
Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *In 2006 you did the exhibition Basking In What Feels Like An Ocean Of Grace, I Soon Realized That I'm Not Looking At It, But Rather, That I Am It Recognizing Myself. Titles seem important to your work. Sometimes you have very long titles. What's their role?*

Wardill: Well that one was because the film was based around a soundtrack I wrote which reflects in on itself. So if you look at sheet music, it's like you're holding a mirror down the middle of it and then you play the music backwards. But I didn't want to actually play it backwards, because I thought it would have allusions to Satanism and I didn't want that. So the title becomes a thing that's almost semi-therapeutic — it has to do the same thing that the work is doing.

Obrist: *What role does chance play in your work?*

Wardill: It helps. [laughter] It's dangerous but it helps.

Obrist: *Is music important to you?*

Wardill: Definitely. Because it does this thing where it bypasses your brain. I've been thinking about dub a lot for the new film, because of this relationship of sort of talking to people who are dead and on repetitions. But I also like what Marguerite Duras said when she was making 'India Song' — that she played music to the actors so they would relax and could do nothing without feeling.

Obrist: *You've got a lot of soundtracks to your films.*

Wardill: Well in something like *Basking In What Feels Like An Ocean Of Grace, I Soon Realized That I'm Not Looking At It, But Rather, That I Am It Recognizing Myself*, the music gives it structure, becomes this cage. But with something like *Born Winged Animals and Honey Gathers the Soul*, [2005], the music is much more like an image. The next film was called 'Ben' [2005], and I quite like the fact that that title was so surly in relationship to the earlier title. It was shot on a set built to look like it was black and white but is in colour and has two stories about Ben. Ben becomes an object halfway through — I was thinking about case studies, and how they take ostensibly casual situations and expand

out to reach giant conclusions and patterns which can be applied to other situations. Because one of the case studies is about a person suffering from paranoia, I tried to make the film paranoid. It's like when you can't disconnect the idea from the form.



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Obrist: *What about the sound of 'Ben'?*

Wardill: The sound is two voices and one of them one is the voice of a girl — Keisha Sandy Wellington. She's reading the case study about the man Ben. The other is the voice of a hypnotist — he lulls you into feeling you can trust him. He's like the voice of God as voice-over. She's a much more faltering, fragile voice.

Obrist: *Which film followed Ben?*

Wardill: After 'Ben', I made a film called 'Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck', [ICA, 2007]. It was a kind of playlet based on ideas from British stained glass. I was trying to shoot it in such a way that it looked like the colours were really saturated but also, as with stained glass, things are framed in a really illogical and fragmented and, it seems, in very contemporary way. The stuff I was looking at was medieval English — you have faces with eyes and noses lobbed off and all these kind of strange framings. The film is framed in a similar way, but it was the beginning of an interest in the way in which stained glass windows were used to communicate to a largely illiterate public. I was trying to make this connection between that and the way Karl Rove had woven

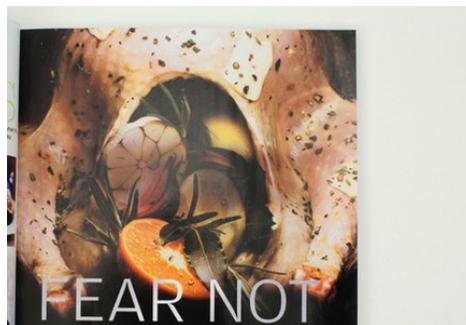
religion into the republican party discourse. So that then leads on to the film 'Sea Oak/The Diamond (Descartes' Daughter)' which was a much more pedagogical way of thinking about that.

Obrist: *Why Descartes' Daughter?*

Wardill: Because there's a famous story about him being summoned by Queen Christina to be part of her court and he doesn't want to go because he is scared his thoughts will freeze over like the water in Sweden. He was right because that was when he died.

Obrist: *And so his intuition was right?*

Wardill: Yeah. His daughter had died when she was five, of scarlet fever and it was the big sorrow in his life that he carried around. He booked into this journey on a ship with his daughter but they never saw her with him. There was a huge storm and in the midst of it the sailors went to look for Descartes. There was no one in his quarters but they found a box with a little automaton that he built that moved just like a little girl. They were shocked by this and thought she had cursed the journey. So they threw her overboard. So he loses his daughter twice, but the second time he loses her she's a strange embodiment of all his rational ideas taken to the point of irrationality. I thought that this was amazing.



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video. Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *Your work has a lot to do with the digital relating to the physical.*

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Wardill: Often the way I make a film is to start it as a performance. Similarly with 'Gamekeepers Without Game' — the performance 'Life is a Dream', at the Serpentine, helped me to think through the film.

Obrist: *So the performance triggers the film, the film triggers performance? It's kind of a communicating vessel maybe?*

Wardill: Yes, but I'm also quite slow, my brain works quite slowly. Which is why I'm not very good at keeping up with these ideas of epiphanies. But that being so, it helps me to think through what the film is going to become.

Obrist: *Can you tell me about this performance you did in Reykjavik [relates to 'Sea Oak/The Diamond (Descartes' Daughter)']?*

Wardill: It was about this imagining of me, trying to remember this scene from a film where there's a diamond in a room protected by lasers, but also, the search for that scene. So I re-created the scene and then I had a girl dressed up as one of the subjects that Etienne Jules-Marey used to use when he was conducting chromophotography. She's playing on a Nintendo Wii under a strobe light, so she's a physical version of his photography. I was trying to think of a contemporary movement that was like sport: playing tennis with the television seemed to be the closest thing, using stunted mechanical movements particular to the present. With the voiceover I wanted to make the connection between this and the fact that his photography was really important in relation to proving the efficiency and productivity of the labour force in America. So there was a relationship between what this original and rationality, and a way of living that is like a machine.

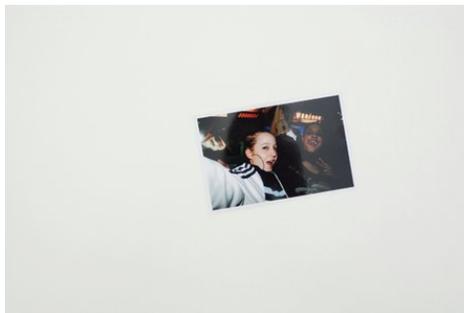
Obrist: *Do you make drawings?*

Wardill: I have big sketch books full of

things, full of workings through ideas and then I have photography and drawings.

Obrist: *Are they like storyboards?*

Wardill: Some are like storyboards. Some are like costume design — similar to things I've seen. Some are credits.



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video.
Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *2010 has been a really active year because of the show at De Appel. But you also had a solo show called Solo Show?*

Wardill: Imaginatively! At Spacex. That was the same film I was showing at The Showroom in London — 'Gamekeepers Without Game'.

Obrist: *Can you tell me more about that film and how it works?*

Wardill: Well, I wrote a script for a future film because I became interested in adopting modes of communication that are really familiar to explore ideas that are difficult. This script has everything you would have in a conventional melodrama: an introduction, a violent scene, a sex scene, a death scene. Everything's told through objects that go from being status symbols, to evidence of crime, to theatrical props... and there are acted scenes you get dropped into, where people are acting very realistically, but not touching each other. It looks a bit like airline food, so you kind of have this separation, but it's all brought together under the rubric of a script. There's also a drumming soundtrack that's in 5.1 that runs all the way through. So you have

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again this feeling of a house being built, but are aware of it being built through individual elements. It's like individual drums become the bricks. It carries you through pathologically too. At one point, the younger son has a panic attack and you become anxious because the drums are fast. As he calms down they slow and you can relax.

Obrist: *It reminds me of the Fassbinder story of the house. You're back to that idea — it seems recurrent.*

Wardill: Definitely.

Obrist: *There's also the house of the Winchester Widow, where the widow of the man who invented the Winchester rifle builds room after room after room.*

Wardill: My next film, 'Full Firearms', is based on that story of Sarah Winchester — she had upset the spirits and they were hounding her, so she builds a house to accommodate them all. She was trying to disorientate them so they would leave her in peace. As a story it's really intriguing but when you actually see the house, it's kind of 'wacky' in a really tinny way.



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video.
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Obrist: *I'm wondering what your unrealised projects, dreams, utopias, projects, the projects you don't dare do (as Doris Lessing pointed out to me recently were so important) might be?*

Wardill: I'm 32 so I hope I still have some unrealised projects! One of the things I

really want to do, but probably won't until I'm Doris Lessing's age is to set up a film school/production company.

Obrist: *Your own structure?*

Wardill: Yes. And then have a group of people that you have a sense of responsibility towards.

Obrist: *Do you have a motto?*

Wardill: A motto?

Obrist: *Hans-Peter Feldman answered the question with an image — a photograph of a boy in front of a closed wooden door, next to a brick wall.*

Wardill: I like that. I like answering a question with an image, but I can't do that here.

Obrist: *What's your connection to science?*

Wardill: Science is massive, how am I supposed to answer that?

Obrist: *Duchamp was inspired by Poincaré.*

Wardill: Well, Marey was a scientist — I was really interested and still am in how those documents which are essentially scientific become influential outside their original intent... the Robert Smithson example as well is, obviously, an example which relates to entropy, I suppose. There's a way in which science adopts the material in order to clarify its ideas that I find interesting.

Obrist: *What ought to change?*

Wardill: The people who are in power ought to change, the reliance of government on business, this ought to change, education should be more elliptical to the economy. Lots of things ought to change.

Obrist: *Are you a situationist?*

Wardill: The inheritance from the

situationists is that spectacle is inherently suspect — I have a real problem with that. Though I obviously have a lot of respect for its history. I think a lot of art people have inherited this attitude, which is really problematic — it relates to a kind of inheritance from fascism, that spectacle in itself, is evil.



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video. Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London.

Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *What role does the computer play in your work. Paul Chan says, 'Linking is beautiful and de-linking is sublime'.*

Wardill: De-linking is sublime?

Obrist: *There are moments when it is important to disconnect.*

Wardill: You know, I was in Chicago giving a lecture and I showed 'Gamekeepers Without Game' and a student asked me, 'What's the relationship between the white space and me and how am I supposed to enter this white space of your film?' I had to keep on asking him what he meant because I didn't really understand. In the end, it seemed to me that it was a kind of compression: the film gets compressed and then de-compressed in your head. I think there's something about what the computer does that has completely changed the way we think about that idea of what images can become and then how they come back to us. Also, it offers up the democratic promise of linking people up, but actually, what you're doing is looking at a screen and it becomes a different matter. It has the potential to be so much, but that potential very often seems unrealised.

Obrist: *It's a 'spectacle of' unrealised projects.*

Wardill: [laughs] Maybe so.

Obrist: *What's your favourite mistake? In our western society, it has become very difficult to make use of mistakes.*

Wardill: I like when you make mistakes in bookshops and in record shops. When you go to buy something but buy something else. Or, I like it when people read things wrongly.

Obrist: *What was the new work you created yesterday?*

Wardill: [laughs] What I did yesterday was try to think about a compilation tape I made for a friend when I was a teenager. It had a picture of a woman on it and her spine was the spine of the cassette and I was thinking about how books become bodies.



'Game Keepers Without Game', 2009, video. Courtesy Fortescue Avenue London. Photo Polly Braden

Obrist: *What's your favourite sport?*

Wardill: Curling. Because it makes art look less ridiculous.

Obrist: *What's time?*

Wardill: Can I answer that with a quote?

Obrist: *Yes of course.*

Wardill: 'The hands of the clock must know where they stand. Otherwise, neither

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is a watch but only a white face and a trick moustache.'

Obrist: *Beautiful. Who said that?*

Wardill: Nabokov.

Obrist: *What have you forgotten?*

Wardill: So many things. [*laughs*]

Obrist: *Do you have dreams?*

Wardill: I have really good dreams. I often have dreams where I'm being chased by a faceless predator around a multi-story car park. I have better dreams than that but that's a re-occurring one.

Obrist: *Please tell me about an exhibition that has inspired you?*

Wardill: An Anselm Franke one in Antwerp, *Animism*. It was very atmospheric but also intelligent. It didn't make this strange disconnection between being emotional or intelligent. It was both things at the same time. Also, I really loved the Richard Wentworth at Lisson about a year ago. You saw all these objects from very different artists, from very different points in their career, but that didn't matter; they were not named. You looked at them for what they were. You didn't really understand it but then you saw the film about Rem Koolhaas' house, shot from the perspective of the cleaner, and you realised in this generous and slow way — 'ah!', that's it' — it's about seeing privilege from another position where it becomes almost comical.

Obrist: *What is energy?*

Wardill: Is it something to do with the present? I wonder if it is, I wonder if that's why the present is so scary — why people are constantly deferring it. I mean that's what money does isn't it — it defers the present to what it might become.

Obrist: *Do you have nightmares?*

Wardill: I had a nightmare the night before the Haswell and Hecker laser show at Conway Hall. It haunted me for a long time. There was an old woman lying on top of me, scratching at me. She was still there when I was awake and I had to leave that show — the show was aggressive attacking.

Obrist: *Jeannette Laverriere, an extraordinary one hundred-year-old designer in Paris, asks visitors, 'Are you political?', and if you say no she doesn't see you. So are you political or do you think art is political?*

Wardill: I think politics has become this difficult thing now — I had a meeting the other day with the poet JH Prynne and he said to me. 'I think artists are parasitical', and I said parasitical in what way? I think there's been this thing that politics has done very slowly, which is to create the idea that art is somehow parasitical and kind of dangerous. That it's sort of fluffy. That it's a useless thing and has been replaced by a weird sort of rationality, which is all to do with the way we spend and the way we serve and what we conserve. The government somehow doesn't allow any sense of responsibility for that and I find that really terrifying and think it's going to get worse. So, yes I'm political. It's completely necessary to be political right now.

Obrist: *And the future is?*

Wardill: I'm not a predictor. I thought that's what you do.

Obrist: *I listen to artists. I'm not predicting anything. Last question: what kind of cameras do you use?*

Wardill: I use everything, everything's a technology. A lot of the time I've used an old Bolex camera, but then the last thing I shot was on HD with 35 mm lenses.

Obrist: *Do you have collections? Do you collect art or found objects?*

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Wardill: I collect cassettes and records, CDs and sort of collect books. I'd like to collect art but can't afford the art I'd like to collect.

Obrist: *What would you like to collect?*

Wardill: I'd collect Rembrandt's 'Abduction of Proserpina', Hans-Peter Feldmann's 'All The Clothes of A Woman', Hollis Frampton's 'Nostalgia'. Oh, lots of things. Actually, I was sort of inspired by the way that you ask questions, to go around asking people if they could collect ten things, what would it be? It's a nice question to ask people.

Obrist: *And you've got already some answers?*

Wardill: Yeah, lots of people have different answers, and lots of people say they wouldn't collect anything. They don't feel like they should.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is co-director of exhibitions and programmes and director of international projects at the Serpentine Gallery, London