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## Exhibition Review: *Andrew Norman Wilson: Kodak*

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*Andrew Norman Wilson: Kodak*. Document. Chicago, Illinois: January 11–February 23, 2019.

Andrew Norman Wilson's thirty-two-minute video *Kodak* (2018) was the beating heart of his eponymous exhibition at DOCUMENT in Chicago. A series of prints that take inspiration from various Kodak products hung in an adjacent gallery while a stack of giveaway posters—of the company's first digital camera from 1973 printed on recto and a text by Nick Irvin on verso—prepared those who entered a dark, curtained gallery. Irvin's text introduced the video's protagonist Rich as a mentally unstable former Kodak employee who became blind as a result of a workplace accident. These details emerge slowly, however, and in short bursts, like flickers of images that stitch together the stories of the character Rich and Kodak's legendary founder George Eastman [Image 1].

"Your time is up," alerts the high-pitched and tinny voice of a woman, beginning a narrative that is driven primarily by sound rather than images. A long minute passes with only



IMAGE 1. Still from *Kodak* (2018) by Andrew Norman Wilson; © 2018 Andrew Norman Wilson; courtesy the artist and DOCUMENT.

darkness to accompany her increasingly aggravated chastising, dramatically peaking with “You have to stop now!” The first discernable image finally surfaces—a portrait of a bespectacled Eastman. A shaky voice that stands in for Eastman implores, “What is a photograph?” He answers himself: “. . . a dream, a reminder of how little you can actually capture.” Responsible for popularizing photography through consumer-grade technology, Eastman, as recorded in history and presented in this well-researched video, successfully tapped into the consumer’s desire to hold onto the fleeting moments of their mortal lives. Spiked with nostalgia, Eastman’s steady ruminations on life, photographic processes, and his business empire provide the bass line for the video, while sentimental family snapshots and highlights from the company’s image archive rhythmically flash in and out of view.

Rich’s grunts and giggles, and the squeaks of tape on rewind and forward interrupt Eastman’s romantic soliloquy throughout. Occasionally, Rich blurts out frustrations at being unable to locate Tape 14—the object of the narrator’s search. Unfortunately for Rich, Tape 14 is the elusive McGuffin in this story. A device that helps drive a film’s plot, a McGuffin is a thing of mystery to viewers even as the characters seem profoundly affected by its aura. *Kodak* builds meaning around this unknown, in search for that which cannot be grasped. For Rich, who desperately strives to reach the builder of his kingdom through listening to the tapes, the search does not transpire in any revelation. Rather, it makes obvious the great gulf—in time and in class—between Eastman and Rich as a lowly laborer of the Kodak empire.

In 1932, suffering from chronic pain in the spine, Eastman took a gun to himself after leaving a terse note reading “To my friends/My work is done/why wait?” A statement of confidence and achievement as much as a suicide note, Eastman’s rhetorical question unfortunately haunts the antihero Rich in this tragic narrative written by Wilson and James N. Kienitz Wilkins. “Why would you abandon me, George?” cries Rich, although it is ambiguous whether Rich’s abandonment is the result of his accident, loss of job, or faith in the company. Cued to Eastman’s suicide note, Wilson, not without irony, edits in video footage of the 2007 planned implosion of Kodak production facilities building #65 in Rochester, where the artist’s father had once worked. The efforts to downsize did not prove sufficient for the company, which filed for bankruptcy in 2012. The old company slogan from 1892, “You press the button. We do the rest,” no longer applies in the hands of today’s autonomous image producers such as Wilson [Image 2].

Wilson’s own story intertwines with his subject: he is a child of a Kodak employee, smiling in many of the family photos featured in the video, and of the generation that has witnessed the transition from an analog world to a digital one. In other words, he lived through the spectacular fall of companies such as Kodak that could not keep up with the changing world, as well as the rise of other companies like Google that are currently shaping today’s society and culture. With an eye to how image and information technologies influence the everyday, Wilson had previously produced a body of critical work titled *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* (2011) after a stint as a contractor at Google. Given this context, Wilson’s depiction of Eastman through the mediation of the loyal yet troubled employee Rich, bereft of vision and work, suggest a deep suspicion toward the entrepreneur.

Here’s a telling moment in the video: Soon after Eastman explains the logic behind Kodak’s adoption of the thirteen-month calendar, which evenly divides fifty-two weeks into



IMAGE 2. Still from *Kodak* (2018) by Andrew Norman Wilson; © 2018 Andrew Norman Wilson; courtesy the artist and DOCUMENT.



IMAGE 3. Still from *Kodak* (2018) by Andrew Norman Wilson; © 2018 Andrew Norman Wilson; courtesy the artist and DOCUMENT.

groups of four, Rich speaks of his divorce after living life at two separate paces that were never in sync. He attempts to remember and reconcile birthdays and anniversaries in two different measures of time in a mumbled calculation of days and weeks. For Eastman, who had no family of his own and whose company followed this calendar from 1928 to 1989 with a degree of efficiency, time was subject to human manipulation—material for production and consumption. Rich, Wilson’s father, and others alike had no choice but to be subject to a managerial organization of time [Image 3].

*Sol*, Latin for the Sun, is the name of the thirteenth month wedged between June and July in the calendric system favored by Eastman. Adopting the month of the sun sounds as romantic as Kodak's marketing of the rotating wheel of slides as the carousel—a product that was recently mythologized by a memorable episode of the television series *Mad Men*. In the first season finale, the leading midcentury ad man, Don Draper, uses his own family photos to convince Kodak that new technology should appeal to nostalgia in order to forge a sentimental bond, like a child traveling round and round, to a place of familiarity and safety. Viewers familiar with that series may have recognized that word for word, the script for Eastman in Wilson's video follows Draper's words.<sup>1</sup> These words, enunciated slowly and unmistakably by both characters, are soaked in memories and emotion. It matters not how fictionalized the origin of the carousel is, because the sentiment rings true: photographs construct our memories.

Toward the end of the video, Eastman returns to the question “What is a photograph?” This time, informed by the decision to kill himself, he describes a photograph as “reorganization of chemicals that make up our memories.” He further adds, “memories are reorganization of chemicals that make up our mind.” In other words, it is human consciousness—what makes Eastman Eastman and Rich Rich—that photography attempts to preserve. “Keep it with Kodak,” Eastman would say. Tragically, Kodak's failure to preserve itself as a viable enterprise parallels Rich's deteriorating mental state. He unravels and is visited by the woman whose voice has been haunting him all along. “Your time is up,” she repeats. Like a vision or a hallucination, a 3-D rendering of a woman standing in the library where Rich has been going through the tapes changes her appearance in a schizophrenic frenzy. She could be a ghost, or a manifestation of suicidal thoughts and voices in Rich's head—memories that have turned against him.

The tapes are an imaginative vehicle for Eastman's biography and Kodak's corporate history in a fiction about a blind devotee to a past American empire. In an age when digital imaging technology is increasingly married to information management of a frightening order, a quaint search for an analog audiotope in the library feels like a reprieve. With Rich seemingly succumbing to the voices in his head, however, Wilson's *Kodak* is anything but pleasantly nostalgic, or even promising or edifying. Perhaps Tape 14, the McGuffin in Wilson's twenty-first-century noir, is a small room that the artist has left for speculation and redemption—a search for the unknown piece of information that could potentially help a careful listener to rewrite the narrative for the record. The thing about a McGuffin, though, is that we'll never know. ■

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1. *Mad Men*, “The Wheel,” Season 1, Episode 13 (directed by Matthew Weiner and written by Matthew Weiner and Robin Veith), AMC, October 18, 2007.