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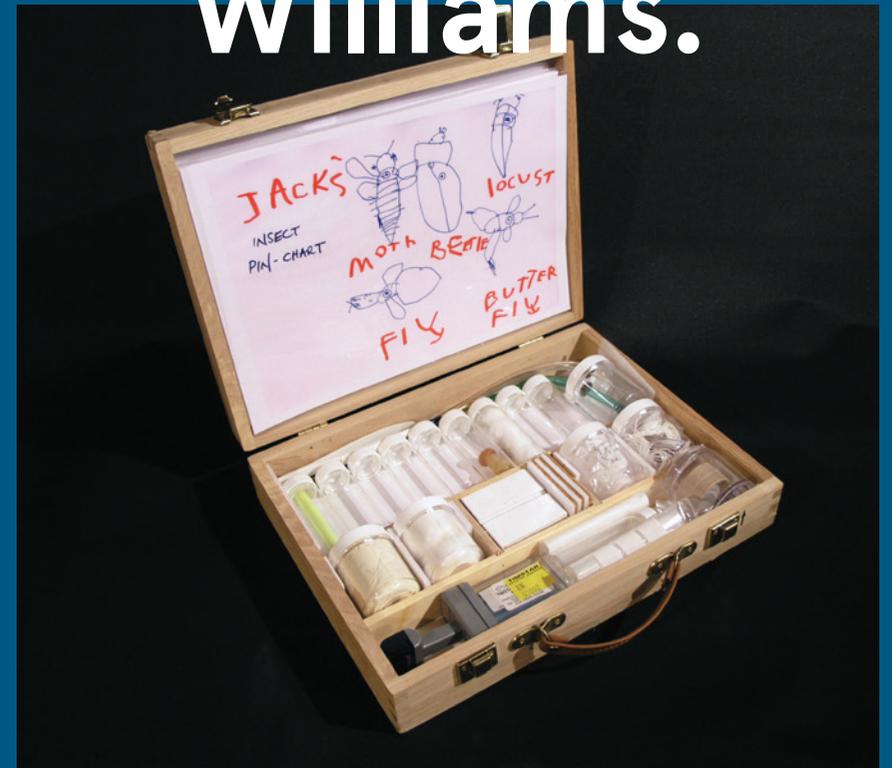
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Everyday Ecologies:

The Art of Father-and-Son Robert Williams & Jack Aylward- Williams.



Solvik Taxonomia/ Quid Pro Quo (Box 1) 2005 Photo. Robert Williams



Solvik Taxonomia/ Quid Pro Quo (Box 2) 2005 Photo. Robert Williams

BY DAVID MICHAEL PEREZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT WILLIAMS

Robert Williams, born 1960 in Liverpool, has always been interested in archival systems of knowledge – from archaeology to mythological beliefs to personal archives. And as an academic and an artist (sculpture, film, performance and writing) his work has regularly involved collaboration, most notably with artist Mark Dion beginning in the late 1990s.

What may be surprising is that his most productive artistic collaboration is with his son, Jack Aylward-Williams, age 16. From the time Jack was a toddler, they have systemically catalogued and defined the natural world around them. Their latest project, *Systema Naturae: A History of In-Animate Nature*, turns their attention to “a collection of quotidian objects”: items resembling flora and fauna that are, in fact, inanimate and unnatural.

Kindling Quarterly (KQ): Before we get to your collaborative body of work with your son, Jack, I wanted to ask you about your academic and artistic work before your son was born. What were your interests before you and your wife Gina had Jack?

Robert Williams (RW): An interesting question. In fact the year that Jack was born signaled a fundamental change in my life across many fronts, and not only because I was becoming a parent, if that wasn’t enough of a sea change. Earlier that year, I had begun what would become a long-term collaborative art practice with Mark Dion. It began with Dion’s Tasting Garden at Lancaster for Artranspennine98. This was curated by Robert Hopper of the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust and Lewis Biggs of Tate Liverpool, and was at that time the most extensive public art event in Europe. It included wonderful artists such as Felix-Gonzales Torres, Christine Borland, Jaume Plensa, Joseph Beuys, Lawrence Weiner, and many others from the West to the East coast, [and] across the backbone of England, the Pennine Hills. I had been leading a small combined art program teaching sculpture when I got my dream job at what was then Cumbria Institute of the Arts in Carlisle (now part of the University of Cumbria), to

run their Fine Art program. This post began a week after Jack was born. At the time, I was (and still am) exploring a range of emergent sources, subjects, and themes, among which are interests arising from archaeology and anthropology: myth and the history of science (natural history and epistemology), with an exploration of sculpture as an invested or magical object, which references the occult and the hermetic. Of course, there have been opportunities for overlap as these threads of inquiry weave in and out of the practice.

KQ: You dedicated the 2006 catalogue, *The-saurus Scienta Lancastriae*, to your own father, Bob Williams, noting that he is “a hard act to follow, but I’m trying to be just like you.” How are your artistic and academic interests informed by time spent with your father?

RW: Actually, because of his work life, my father was largely absent from my childhood. Not out of choice. It was simply that, as a blue-collar worker in a car factory in the 1960s, he had very little personal choice about what we now think of as a work/life balance. Furthermore, he is from a generation that did not exhibit overt displays of affection, which I think was difficult for him, as he is an emotional and loving person. As a role model, he really provided me with a sense of fairness and responsibility. It wasn’t always an easy relationship, but he did help get those values across. You know, firm but fair?

In terms of my career choices—he had very different ideas about suitable occupations, but he was nonetheless supportive and respectful of my choices. I owe him and my mother, Jean, a great deal given the huge cultural shift from their experience and background to the one that I aspired to as a young artist. His real influence on me, strangely enough, is through my adult relationship with him. We are much closer to each other now than we had been when he was a younger dad (he is 81 now.) In my maturity and in becoming a father myself, I think we now have much more in common and have greater mutual respect.

KQ: The ongoing project with Jack—starting essentially when he was a toddler—has been rather neatly summed up in terms of Jack as Scientist and you as Museum, or more specifically you’ve said you serve as “facilitator, curator and organizer of collections that he generates and interprets.” How much of this dynamic stems directly from Jack?

RW: At its center, the work, particularly those projects like the Thesaurus project, emerged from shared experience, discussion, research, and negotiation, as well as the particular relationship between Jack and myself. It was perhaps an affective game where we were able to make up the rules as we went along—trying to hold and share experiences that fall outside of the normative paradigms. With our roles negotiated, he the collector/observer and me the curator/organizer, we began the project on Sir Richard Owen’s two hundredth birthday, taking the boundaries of Williamson Park as our microcosmic world for a full calendar year, and opening our minds to anything that the environment, landscape, context, and setting could offer. Jack’s observations make up a significant part of the final work. The labeling and organization of the objects, mounts, materials and specimens are based on his taxonomical constructions and form a significant part of the text within the book that was published to accompany the exhibition.

Jack’s opinion now is that while he recognized that we were engaging in a shared project, he didn’t really understand it within an art context—it was simply a great way to spend time together and to talk about the things that we encountered as we collected. My strategy, given Jack’s personality, was not to force an agenda or have any outcome in particular in mind—I had no real idea of how this could be presented. The field-study stage really was as open as that, and the strategy has remained so for all our projects together. Also, Jack has a habit of making his fascinations fascinating to me. So, in terms of the activity of collecting, it differs in no way from our regular activity. This is something that we have always done together—whether making a collection of

sticks or shells, or in his early years, outlet sockets and drainpipes that fascinated him to the exclusion of everything else. These early projects ended up as a photographic archive and publication as they were not very portable collections in and of themselves.

I think that articulation of the work emerges from its formation. There is a great quote from Foucault about the unfinished work from the *Archaeology of Knowledge* that seems to me a good way to represent the process:

“The never completed, never wholly achieved uncovering of the archive forms the general horizon to which the description of discursive, the analysis of positivities, the mapping of the enunciative field belong... Archaeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive”

This is echoed in Umberto Eco’s ideas about *The Open Work*. Also, what I have in mind is very well indicated in Simon O’Sullivan’s excellent investigation of ideas concerning affect that he applies to art practice:

“Art, then, might be understood as the name for a function: a magical, an aesthetic, function of transformation. Art is less involved in making sense of the world, and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming in the world. Less involved with knowledge and more involved in experience, in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced.”

KQ: What I find so fascinating about this approach—exploration of the ecologies of the everyday—is how easily it extends to so many aspects of our lives. Meaning from the day they are born we are all trying to build and convey a taxonomy of meaning and objects for our kids, one that is far from absolute and historically contingent. Would you agree with this interpretation?

RW: In part, given that the work emerges from what for us is normal, regular discourse about our experience of the world, and I don't really think this differs much in the way many if not all engaged parents interact with their children. If anything, the business of making this material available to an audience makes it significant in that it becomes isolated and highlighted, and it is placed into a context that invites engagement and reflection not only by us, but also by third parties.

The meaning, if it is there at all, is generated as part of an interpretive relationship between the work and the viewer. For us, it is simply the collated evidence of our activity, and that is necessarily concerned with the quotidian and the serendipitous as a field of operations. While I think that it is important to understand the context for the collection of the material, the context being that we are the agents of the collection as well as the basis for the investigation—this is inherent in the documentation as much as in the collection itself—it is nonetheless the collection, the archive, or the museum that the audience meets. I say this in acknowledgement of the fact that as my colleague Mark Dion says, the collection is always a reflection of the collector. This might suggest that a level of veracity is needed in making clear how the collection came into being. To this end, Jack and I usually include an element that deals with the fieldwork—the collecting equipment and paraphernalia—bags, cameras, maps and so on, as well as the footwear worn – usually my Doc Martens and his Wellington Boots. In this way, we can be 'present' in the work as a matter of evidence, without it turning into vanity or hubris.

KQ: Especially in terms of childhood education, we have some contradictory approaches to the natural world, mostly notably the way we anthropomorphize animals. How does your work respond to this larger tendency?

RW: I feel that there is an opportunity to positively frame such cultural tropes. The idiom of the talking animal of course tells us as much

about us as it does of the non-human world. How this is played out and incorporated into particular world-views is perhaps more of the issue, certainly in terms of consequences. I think that children can separate fantasy from experience in many respects. And indeed Jack is very aware of the issues surrounding the problem of the survival of the cutest in terms of his interests in conservation. Sometimes the anthropomorphic overlap can be very useful too. One example might be the opportunity we had to closely observe a common spider, an *Araneus diademata*, that lived for a summer in our kitchen during the field stage of our project *Historico-naturalis et Archaeologica ex Dale Street*. Jack called it, not very imaginatively perhaps, Spidey. Part of the discussions served to test our observations of this organism and to make comparisons with a point of reference, which in this case for Jack was *Charlotte's Web*, one of his favorite books/films. If nothing else, there is an opportunity to empathize with non-human creatures on a level easy for humans, and to establish a sense of live-and-let-live that in turn creates a space within which we can challenge the culturally normative anthropomorphism and other attitudes toward animals. For example, in relation to another project I was involved in, Jack and I had a conversation that emerged from my reading of Erica Fudge's book *Pets* that speaks of "Dog Love"—the dog loves its human in a dog way, while the human loves the dog in its human way. His own insights into this were fascinating, particularly in relation to animals that he knows and loves himself.

KQ: How important has the issue of Climate Change been for your project? How do you and Jack discuss it as it relates to your projects, but also your family?

RW: The subject and our responses to the problem are directly linked to Jack's personal agenda to save the planet. Broadly speaking, Gina and I of course subscribe to sustainable practices—recycling, re-using and attempting to reduce waste—and we are as much as anyone else concerned with the issues of Cli-



mate Change. However, it is also fair to say that this was in no way any more considered in practice than anyone else might do. Jack on the other hand insists on a more principled and methodical approach, one that has very positively impacted us as a family, raising our awareness and helping us to change our behavior, as well as providing a shared set of activities. Recycling is his self-selected job at home and he is assiduous in sorting and preparing the material either for re-use, or to send to the local authority's recycling scheme—this extends to separating components such as the plastic film within tetrapacks to enable the card to be recycled, and is the case for all the material that he handles. This extends to reusing the raw material of plastic and polythene that would ordinarily go to landfill, but instead will be used in another activity important to him, the crafting of "Charity Cats." These are felt cats that he stuffs with the plastic to re-use and contain it. Indeed the thread is made of stretched polythene that he uses to detail and to stitch the material together. He sells these for causes of his own choice—the funds often going to animal rescue centers or disability funds. Visitors to the house rarely leave without having to buy one

of these exquisite objects. A further example of his good practice is that he re-uses all plastic bottles as propagators to grow food plants from seed. He will only grow organic produce, and indeed he selects only heritage varieties to avoid any sort of GM contamination. The allotment is the love of his life and he spends time every day tending his plants to reduce and eventually to eliminate our vegetable food-miles. He is a great advocate of foraging, and sources wild food as part of his plan. Of course, he uses all our organic waste for compost, and even has plans to collect from our neighbors. Like many young adults, he loves his digital life, but even here he is very conscious of having as little impact on the environment as possible. He will only ever power his iPad/iPod with electricity sourced from his collection of solar panels. I like to think that our projects that explore relationships with non-human organisms have contributed to his sensibility, but I also believe this is very much his own personal project. His commitment is total, and I admire him greatly for his principles. Of course, this means that sustainability and Climate Change issues are often discussed within the family and have become a central part of the family dynamic.

KQ: Essays regarding your work cited the ways in which masculinity and gender come into play.

RW: I was fascinated by writer Simon Morris’ reading of the collaborations with Jack in these projects as examples of feminist strategies. The work is predicated on a personal, emotional, affective, and shared practice between a father and son. For me there is a sense that male relationships are positive things, not necessarily predicated on rivalry or machismo posturing, especially in a context of the autistic spectrum where parallel play can be rewarding and fulfilling.

KQ: As Jack will be adult soon, how do you see the project evolving over time?

RW: Well, we both recognize the changes that are coming, and that some of these will be challenging. But we have agreed that we will continue to work on projects together. I think his current interests in sustainability will guide our thinking. Indeed, one project as yet unrealized, is all about his inventions to save the planet. These are sort of positive feedback, perpetual motion machines that generate more power than they use. He worked with a photographer friend to make blueprints of the drawings for these inventions. The attraction here is that they used a non-toxic cyanotype alternative, and no energy other than sunlight for the process of production.

In terms of our collaboration, the pendulum had swung more to Jack. To me, my role was facilitator and will ultimately be as curator of the work. We did this recently with our *Systema Naturae* (2014) show in Carlisle. Here we collected quotidian objects that in some way represented flora and fauna, but which had to be manufactured, cultural objects, not actual specimens. We wanted to make a kind of anthropological study, using scientific methods of sampling, to see what our culture makes of the relationship to the non-human. My colleague, the conservation biologist Dr. Andrew Ramsey from Derby University, then applied the statistical analysis to draw up

distribution charts for the “species” that we found. So, in many ways this is a more sophisticated approach to our projects that reflects Jack’s own questions about the world.

KQ: What has surprised you the most about working with Jack?

RW: The relationship is very rewarding for both of us. In many ways it is similar to other collaborative projects. While Jack and I are father and son, we are also best mates with all that entails. One idea useful to explore in the context of models of collaborative practice is that which Simon Morris refers to as the Third Mind. In his text, an exploration of our dynamics, Morris develops an idea drawn from William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, who, in the 1950s, pioneered “cut-ups.”

Jack always impresses me with the depth and breadth of his discussions. He has great insight and is capable of making enormous conceptual leaps. At the same time, he can be challenging and insightful. It is probably best expressed in the following exchange (a transcript from an audio archive that illustrates a typical discussion)

RW: What were you saying about the pond-snails Jack. Their shells being what?

JAW: Their shells are like windows...

RW: And what do they do?

JAW: Erm, I think it’s mainly for looking out of, or when they are not going along to eat... when they are not eating or moving, they just look out of their windows.

RW: Do they?

JAW: ‘Cause their windows are actually their shell.

RW: And what do they see from their windows?

JAW: Probably just looking around... like we do out of our windows.

RW: Right, and can they do that underwater?

JAW: I think they can.

RW: Oh wow, they must get some good views of the underwater gardens then.

JAW: Of course, those little horn things are their eyes.

RW: Yes...

JAW: They have two eyes like us, but land-snails have four.

RW: Really?

JAW: Everybody seems to draw them like water snails, with two eyes.

RW: What, you mean like in the storybooks and cartoons, and things?

JAW: Yes. They are supposed to have four eyes, land-snails, but people seem to draw them like they have two eyes like us, or water-snails. Oh look, there’s a little water flea there...

RW: Is there?

JAW: Yes

RW: Oh, I can see a flatworm!

JAW: Where?

RW: Over in the corner there, can you see the flatworm...

JAW: Oh yes!

RW: ... A planarian.

JAW: Yes

RW: They are beautiful aren’t they?

JAW: Can’t see many things in there, I can only see one planarian.

RW: What, in the small pond?

JAW: Yes, in the fish one (sings and yawns simultaneously).

RW: Tell you what I can see in the snail-pond.

JAW: What

RW: Lots of snail poo.

JAW: Snail poo?

RW: Yes, look at that stuff...

JAW: That’s not snail poo!

RW: ‘Tis too.

JAW: How do you know? (with emphasis) How-do-you-know?

RW: Well, I don’t really, I’m guessing.

JAW: That, that is water plant! Try... Look!

RW: I don’t think I want to pick it up...

JAW: Water plant...

RW: OK, better put it back.

JAW: Oh! Oops, its, I think you were right...

RW: (Laughing) It is snail poo isn’t it?

JAW: Argh, yes!

RW: You just had your fingers all over snail poo!

JAW: (exasperated) Daddy!