

MANUAL FOR (THE) WORK

1. The drawings of Lisa Wilkens (*1978, Berlin) are not drawings, they are works.

Maybe they are in the first place not even artworks, but rather works of art. *Art* seems for Wilkens to be not more – but certainly also not less – than a vehicle, a ‘tool’ for questioning, researching and exercising the notion of labour and its effect on mankind in all its facets.

2. Wilkens’s works are elaborated (e-labor-ated), literally worked through. Although very small in scale (and also in quantity), they are meticulously, hyper-realistically drawn in Chinese ink on exclusive paper that could almost be mistaken for antique or pre-industrial. By her intentional use of these materials, Lisa Wilkens links her works explicitly to the notion of craftsmanship, hereby keenly showing that there is a huge difference between the concept of craftsmanship and the idea of labour. In fact, the discrepancy between the two lies in the word ‘involvement’.

3. The rise of the Industrial Revolution in 1750 in England, marked the evolution from craftsmanship to labour. Due to mechanisation and technology – both abstract processes by nature – quantity and scale of ‘work’ exploded and therefore became not only abstract in themselves, but also in the eyes of its manufacturer. The involvement, passion or individual expression that used to be inherent in ‘work’ faded away: craft became labour, the manufacturer became a worker, involvement morphed into alienation. Note: Lisa Wilken’s works are figurative.

4. In this sense, and more specifically within the framework of the arts, the works of Lisa Wilkens are anachronistic, inherently trying to de-chronologise the ongoing process of the industrialisation of imagery. It seems that for Wilkens, the constant contemporary and hysterical flow of industrial imagery provokes an anti-industrial mentality, method and technique, in order to ‘slow it down’. Not only because that could be inherently one function of art, but especially because this work ethic is necessary to situate her works paradoxically exactly back where they belong: in a post-industrial, super-fast and overwhelmingly consumerist society. They function as a ‘pre-futuristic, post-antiquarian’ mirror, or vice versa, for a zeitgeist that has lost its balance.

5. It is striking to see that in the works of Lisa Wilkens, in their attempt to seek some kind of balance, this equilibrium is inherently omnipresent in their semiotics. In fact, many of the works represent carefully and patiently drawn scenes of repetitive, detached, ‘non-craft’ forms of labour. Furthermore, some of the imagery is taken from manuals for highly technological machinery, used for performing labour that is completely emptied of human interference, such as 3D-printers or other digital systems. Wilkens uses her meticulous, almost maniacally detailed and crafted drawing technique, (which brings to mind medieval clerical copyists) to represent images of industrial and post-industrial fabrication. Seen from a semiotic perspective, these works are thus perfectly in balance, since their carefully crafted medium coincides exactly with the anti-industrial message to which they refer.

6. Surprisingly, there is also an intriguing, even slightly etymological, flipside to the semiotic coin of Lisa Wilken’s works, as they seem to explore the meaning of work (or labour) itself. What does it mean for these works or their creator to represent highly industrialised labour by means of purely drawn examples of extreme craftsmanship? Are they meaningless? Pointless? Useless? Or exactly the opposite? And, by extension, what is work or labour in itself? In this sense, the form and content – or medium and message – of Lisa Wilken’s works perform as each other’s counterpart. And it’s probably by looking alternately at both of them that one is able to find the keenly desired balance of today.

7. This is not the manual for (the) work.

Thibaut Verhoeven
Ghent, August 2018