

INFINITE JEST

Jan Tumlir on Eric Wesley's *The Bell*



View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL.

ARRIVING FOR THE OPENING of Eric Wesley's survey-scale exhibition at the Los Angeles gallery 356 S. Mission Rd. in January 2015, visitors encountered a new Nissan parked at a rakish angle in the back lot, with its front doors ajar and music blaring from its speakers. That this was an artwork would surely never have occurred to many of those in attendance had it not been for the checklist, where it was designated *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, with materials given as "clear lacquer paint on Infiniti." The added finish seals the deal on the car's integrity as a sculptural proposition—an assisted readymade—and thereby advances its merely promotional claim on the infinite to the condition of an aesthetic promise, albeit one that proves decidedly ironic on reflection. As a found object that was in fact rented, the vehicle could also be seen as a monument to transience and ephemerality. After the close of the show, one had to imagine the automobile undergoing a further turn in this Duchampian game of contextual transposition, mingling inconspicuously with all the other non-art cars in the rental fleet upon return. Moreover, once replaced within its original context, Wesley's Infiniti can only be faced with steady depreciation, the fate of all uncollected cars. This is the crux of the artist's joke on the world: The infinite, the endless, the eternal are only available to us mortals as time-sensitive concepts. Yet precisely by withholding the punch line—on either side of the art/life divide, his car operates invisibly—Wesley dispatches our thoughts toward a black star of cosmic inertia.

A quasi catalogue raisonné prepared for the occasion of the 356 S. Mission Rd. show linked the works on view to the artist's past projects, detailing an evolution of thought around a consistent set of themes—concerning the history of avant-garde art, relativity, and *n*-dimensional thought. Included in its pages is the self-published book *West Camp Beans* (1999), which is described in an introductory blurb as a "travelogue recounting the artist's month-long journey from Los Angeles, California to Nine Mile, Alaska and back during the last solstice of the millennium." This was a road trip accomplished in "one dimension," as Wesley explains it—driving through shortening days toward night, and then back again, at the close of the twentieth century. It opens a paradoxical perspective on the multidimensionality of his *Infinity Project*—as well as that of his latest endeavor, which involves the repurposing of a disused Taco Bell in Cahokia, Illinois (just across the Mississippi River from Saint Louis), into a self-run and ideally permanent exhibition space for his art. The idea of commandeering a locale off the beaten track of the art capitals and depositing his work in the middle of nowhere, so to speak, occurred to Wesley on the Alaskan trek. And the site that he chose is no more incidental than his selection of a car named Infiniti for his LA show.



View of "Eric Wesley/St. Louis (The Bell)," 2016–17, 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL. Center: *Burrito Painting #4 (Sesos)*, 2016.

THE APPROACH to the space of *The Bell*, as the work came to be known, is critical to its function: Traveling south on I-64 from the city center of Saint Louis into Illinois, one must first pass through the industrial outback of Sauget, with its hydroelectric plants, mining companies, truck stops, and strip clubs. Then one turns onto Camp Jackson Road, which cuts a wide swath through Cahokia and gives us a drive-by view of a succession of commercial outlets competing for the attention of motorists with gaudy signage. The route puts us firmly inside the "architecture of entropy," as Robert Smithson phrases it in his seminal essay "Entropy and the New Monuments" (originally published in the June 1966 issue of this magazine). Here, the ostensibly eternal momentum of Zeno's arrow collides with the dismally repetitive geometry of "discount centers and cut-rate stores with their sterile facades. On the inside of such places are maze-like counters with piles of neatly stacked merchandise; rank on rank it goes into a consumer oblivion," as Smithson puts it. In other words, oblivion, not infinity, is the fate of all temporal trajectories under such conditions. Yet this entropic zone lies at the epicenter of pre-Columbian Mississippian culture; the famed earthworks known as the Cahokia Mounds loom not far away. Contemplating *The Bell* (its alternate title is *Eric Wesley/St. Louis*) in this expansive, at once pre- and posthistorical framework prompts reflection on the extent to which Wesley's work as a whole can be situated in critical relation to post-Minimalism. His road trips and car readymades recall that movement's implicit stake in a postwar culture of automotive mobility, its vehicular mappings of America's unromantic ruins.

Wesley also has a long-standing fascination with drive-in fast food, which, when seen from the perspective of art, downgrades the idea of aesthetic experience to a short-lived pleasure, closely followed by dyspeptic regret. Now we arrive at the locus of ludic abjection in his work, namely, the burrito. This openly comedic and culturally loaded trope reaches far back in Wesley's oeuvre, being traceable to a show titled "Enchilada 'The Endless Burrito,'" first presented in 2002 at the Meyer Riegger gallery in Karlsruhe, Germany. Applying a logic that undergoes diametric reversal in *The Bell*, a space of visual contemplation was there converted into one of oral consumption. A wall erected in the middle of the gallery hid a makeshift kitchen, with only a small, glory-hole-like opening connecting to the front, through which the "endless burrito" was slowly pushed and incrementally segmented off on request from hungry guests. The 356 S. Mission Rd. exhibition, for its part, featured a circular stained-glass window depicting the contents of a burrito seen as a transversal slice, and this motif was reprised in a suite of five paintings, executed in a variety of styles, finally installed in the Cahokia location. At *The Bell*, these works' culinary content becomes context-appropriate, while the offer of immediate pleasure inherent in fast food is eternalized as art, but again not without irony: This is a "golden section" alarmingly tinged with bathroom humor, at once phallic and scatological.

At *The Bell*, there is nothing to eat, though one can imagine that some part of the clientele stopping in might want to do just that. From the outside, Wesley's building, with its reassuring Mission-style design, does not immediately declare its rarefied distinction from the surrounding businesses, which include an inordinate number of chain restaurants. There is in fact another, newer Taco Bell just down the street, closer to the interstate, that is in full working order—a "straight man" doppelgänger. The first clue that Wesley's restaurant is not "straight" is an absence of signage. The bell once set into the arch that rises above the roof has gone missing. Also, the small patch of lawn extending out from its facade is now planted with rows of corn that twist disconcertingly into a maze. These exterior alterations could be overlooked, but once inside, the experience turns openly anomalous. The tables and chairs of the dining area have all been removed, and in their place are two freestanding sculptural constructions both consisting of a pair of trapezoidal glass planes, heroic in scale (just over human height), that meet at a ninety-degree angle along their straight edge and fan out on the other side as they proceed upward. Art-savvy viewers might be tempted to conjure up precedents from the West Coast Light and Space and Finish Fetish movements of the 1960s, but a glance out the window confirms the origin of these works in the design of the Pizza Hut right across the street. This franchise, in fact owned by the same parent company as Taco Bell, boasts dynamically stylized corner windows, which are here precisely reproduced in the absence of their support structure. Likewise perplexing is the appearance of the air duct above them, which is bent, unpragmatically but elegantly, into a tuba-like shape. The counters that would normally open onto the space of food preparation are neatly walled in, with three burrito paintings installed where the cashiers formerly greeted their patrons. Behind this is an empty kitchen and then another wall, sealing it off from the pantry. As in Wesley's Karlsruhe show, a small hole has been gouged, more roughly this time around, into this partition. Peering through, one makes eye contact with a crow, perched on a branch in a state of frozen vigilance. On a table near the entrance, the 356 S. Mission Rd. catalogue gives us the opportunity to retrace the steps that led up to this point: the former division of the Meyer Riegger gallery into a dining space of reception and a kitchen space of production, now including a supply room. In the terms of the complex psychosexual analogies set up so far between architecture and organism, we are here asked to travel backward from the zone of phallic extension through the testicular pump to a storehouse of genetic material. At the terminus of this passage, in an ominous showdown, we meet the logic of the gaze. The bird installed there was selected for its highly evolved sense of facial recognition, a fact emphasized in the ancient-sounding name that Wesley gave to his animal "father": *Heseeus*.

The assertive nature of the name—He-see-us—carries within it a question as to who the "he" that sees and the "us" that are seen are. Is it important to mention, in this regard, that Wesley is an artist of mixed racial background? Yes, but only on the condition that it does not come up first, as the overarching criterion for reading his work. Ideas about passing and about identity as a theatrically performed negotiation with an oppressive order (as explored in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Fred Moten, for instance) are evident in the structure of *The Bell*. Wesley's appropriation of a corporate property as a semicovered exhibition space is a gesture that points toward self-starting autonomy, and yet an awareness of perpetual surveillance is insistently factored in, precluding the possibility that this space could ever be romanticized as an aesthetic sanctuary. Further, we might begin to think of the project as playing on the opposition between integrationist and separatist ideologies, and, at the extreme, ideas about racial "purity" and fears of miscegenation.



Eric Wesley, *Infinity Project (Black)*, 2015, clear lacquer on Nissan Infiniti. Installation view, 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles. Photo: Alexandra Noel.

SUCH ANXIOUS CONCERNS have always lurked as a subtext within Wesley's work. The clear coating on his Infiniti can be construed as a prophylactic, while the core-sample views of the "endless burrito" speak, unambiguously, to castration. As of this writing, he is at work to replace the missing bell of *The Bell* with one that makes the occluded vaginal symbolism of the original overt; once installed, it will silently peel out a call to nonconsummation.

Control over reproduction is a matter of biopolitics, perhaps its highest concern, and in Wesley's work it can be linked to a historical narrative of cultural containment. While the Cahokia Mounds stand to silently refute stereotypical views of pre-Columbian North America—that it was barely populated and had no dense settlements, grand architecture, or "advanced civilizations"—another nearby site, Ferguson, Missouri, exposes a different set of repressions and conjures other acts of historical violence, both physical and social. The 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown is an event that has barely begun to recede in public memory, and informed the controversy around Kelley Walker's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis this past autumn. *The Bell* is certainly impacted by these social developments, and yet it insists on a critical measure of distance, suggesting that the politics of representation are far too complex to be assuaged simply by making visible what was invisible, including what was excluded. For Wesley, it would seem, every stage of acceptance must be met with another round of refusals. The artist has repeatedly asserted that he wants to be both "underground" and "popular." These words are carefully chosen, suggesting a broader field of cultural engagement that could take inspiration from music, for instance, and a long line of genres from blues to techno to hip-hop that managed to smuggle marginal or subcultural content into the mainstream. For him, I believe, the tense two-sidedness of this equation is a recipe for troubling beauty, an impression corroborated by the fond nickname he gives to *The Bell*—"La Belle."

A sort of Salon des Refusés (whose precedents may be tracked through the subsequent succession of more independent minded efforts, from Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* to Donald Judd's sited galleries in Marfa), *The Bell* is at once a monument to the artist and an anti-monument, as Smithson defined it. It would appear that on Wesley's intellectual map, all of these roads converge on this Midwestern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and now, swapping one place-name for another, we can ask the question that Smithson asked of Passaic, New Jersey, almost half a century ago: Has Cahokia replaced Rome as the Eternal City? Even when posed in jest, the query's implications are serious. Wesley's desire to link the endless to the everyday via an "underground" passage that could prove to be "popular" is one that cuts to the quick of identity, of the political economy of subjective formation and its representation. As long as his *Bell* remains in operation, the seemingly intractable power lines that run between the "ones" and the "others" will provide material for aesthetic undoing, with a formal joke that will not grant to any side the privilege of the last laugh.

"Eric Wesley/St. Louis (*The Bell*), Phase 3" is on view at 1296 Camp Jackson Road, Cahokia, IL, through May.

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