



## REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s

### Interview with Elaine Shemilt

Interview by Deirdre Mackenna, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2012

**DM:** The projects are grouped into community and context process, context and exhibition and critical feedback, which is helpful, but I suspect we will be leaning back and forward. First of all I can start by asking which of the works that you have produced do you consider to be the most important and why?

**ES:** It's a really difficult question, because I could say that the early work really informs everything that I do now, in a sort of way, but I mean the work weaves in and out, I have this feeling that artists quite often have only one really good idea. You keep rehashing it in any shape or form for the whole of your career, so I don't really know how to answer. I think it's more the mode of working, that semi-performance and the use of the space.

I think it's down to things like using proximities. By that I mean that something to do with the space between the viewer and what they are viewing - that was always very important to me, which is why I went into working with installation, and video was a perfect media for recording events. I didn't really want performance as such, I wanted somehow to incorporate movement. So your question 'which was the most important piece of work?' - I suppose those early videos have informed everything that I do now, in some shape or form.

**DM:** Are there other works that are important to you, that are not more widely acknowledged than some externally

**ES:** Well those early video works were not widely acknowledged. The very early ones were shown at the Serpentine Gallery in the video show, and I had something shown at the Acme Gallery, and I think that I regarded the main work as the end product being the installation or the prints that I was left with. The video was the vehicle on the way and I am embarrassed to say that I didn't keep the video's - well very few of them, I think there are only a couple now in existence.

**DM:** How did you actually produce the videos?

**ES:** Well to begin with, I was at Winchester School of Art, and I asked the head of sculpture if he would get a portable video camera. Nobody else was using a video camera, I can't even remember now where I'd seen or heard or come across a portable video camera, but I think I was in my second year at Winchester. The head of sculpture got me a portable video camera, and I set up installations. At that time I was using myself - my body, as part of the installation, as part of the construction and the video camera - I just put it on a tripod, switched it on, and recorded myself walking through these structures, or performing I suppose, in front of it. As I recall, I always put the camera fixed on the tripod. I didn't walk about with it.

- DM:** What year would that have been?
- ES:** That would have been 1975. [Editors' Note: 1974]
- DM:** Can you describe the works a little bit more, in terms of the glass transition from 2 dimensional sculptures to static works? Most of the works of that period are called untitled aren't they?
- ES:** OK, so I was using myself, I was dealing with the deconstruction of myself as an art object, (and I did read Lucy Lippard's book), so if you imagine an image like this: I drew on the wall behind me, a shape of myself, there are references back to Northern Island, the conflict in Northern Island, and that's why I took up certain postures. That's why I used crosses and marks of on the pavement or marks on the wall, and also that the breeze block structure. So then I placed myself in front of the drawing and the marks on the wall, and then I held a sheet of glass to give a certain perspective and also to obscure my face slightly. There was a sequence of these images, where the figure is gradually covered up, and it ends up something like that, this is one of the early videos, which doesn't exist anymore All I've got are the photographs as a record of the performance.
- DM:** So the process you have just described was the process of making the video work? Was that then shown as an outcome?
- ES:** The video was shown as the outcome, however, at the time, I think I thought that it was sufficient to hold onto the photographs - obviously, because I haven't kept the video. But the making of the work was really important. It led to the next piece, which led to the next piece, which led to next piece and recording it with the video was just a part-and-parcel of everything else I was doing.
- DM:** So how did you show that video work?
- ES:** I would have shown it with the photographs, so when the video wasn't actually running and someone stepped into the Gallery, or the art space for example, in the Acme Galleries, the video wasn't always running, so there was always something for someone to look at. For example these; I made square and rectangular boxes that roughly in the shape of an arm, or a torso, or a leg and screen printed the bit of the body onto the canvas box, and they were stuffed with foam. Then those were piled up in a heap and there were photographs on the wall, so there was an installation for people to look at, and if they were curious enough, they would stay and look at the video.
- DM:** Why was the video not always working?
- ES:** Necessarily I think in those days, things couldn't function, couldn't run all the time 24 hours a day, they were switched off, or they weren't switched on or whatever.
- DM:** Does that mean you wouldn't have felt, (regardless of how you felt about photographing sculpture works) that video itself was that viable enough of a format?

**ES:** The thing that was very frustrating was that you couldn't edit video, (well I couldn't very well), and it was very hard to. I worked with a single recording and if that didn't work, I'd have to do the whole thing again, because the quality of transferring one tape to another was fairly disastrous. And that was the other thing, I had one master, and we didn't have the equipment at Winchester School of Art in those days to make multiples, so I'd have one master. Also I think that I was working in relative isolation in those days.

**DM:** The ideas that influenced your work? What and whom would you say were your key influences?

**ES:** Well one of the reasons, to go back to the first question, when you said to me, what do I consider as my most important work? I think in those days when I was in my very early 20s, and I now look at students and see that verging of ideas and the ease of which, when you're really young, it is possible to make an honest interpretation of your inner world; it gets more difficult as you get older. But that's why I would say that those early works are really my most important, because the ideas came from my formative experience, growing up in Northern Ireland. They were sort of a gut response to my emotions and my feelings when I was 20, 21, 22 They were about loss, the experience of someone close to me dying, or they were about the confusion of how to fit in to society. They were about the bewilderment at not being taken seriously as an artist, as a female. Some of those things can seem quite juvenile, but they are honest They are how it is when you're a young woman trying to make a statement, trying to be an artist, so I was categorised as a feminist at certain points throughout my career, but I was never a strident. I'll unravel that a bit, I think I'm a feminist that is very appreciative of men and their importance and value, and how we work and fit together, how its more to do with the sort of personal, or it was much more to do a personal attempt to make my presence felt, as an artist.

**DM:** At the time, were there other peers? Or younger artists whose practice you were influenced by who were successful in making in their presence felt?

**ES:** Not in undergraduate, not when I was starting these video works. Interestingly enough when I went to the Royal College of Art, I became very friendly with Helen Chadwick and somebody called Mandy Havers. Helen was at Chelsea School of Art and Mandy was at Slade, and Sir Laurence Gowing, who was the principal of Slade School of Art, took an interest in all 3 of us. He influenced me and encouraged me quite a lot, because coming out of Winchester, I felt quite isolated about the type of work I was making. When I went to the Royal College of Art I felt much more affirmed, I didn't particularly find it easy as a student, at any point, but there, there was a sort of peer group that I found myself working much more comfortably with.

**DM:** What year was that?

**ES:** That was 1976 -1979. And then a little but later on I did a residency for 2 years at South Hill Park Art Centre, that's where I made a few videos. The 2 that still exist and the one that's in question here was made a South Hill Park Arts Centre.

- DM:** And that was Doppelgänger?
- ES:** It was Doppelgänger yes, and I think the other one was called Women Soldiers.
- DM:** And you made both of these at?
- ES:** South Hill Park.  
I made a lot of other work as well, these were becoming more sort of incidental. I was concentrating much more on installation, print making, sculpture, and I was moving towards the situation where I was using print and photography in my installations.
- DM:** From the early 1980s?
- ES:** Yes.
- DM:** Going back to Winchester, and RCA did you collaborate creatively?
- ES:** In those days, no, not really.
- DM:** Was your peer group at Winchester a stimulating one?
- ES:** I was in the sculpture department and you have to remember, in 1972-1973, no 1972-1973 I was at Brighton doing a foundation, in 1973-1976, I was in Winchester. Funny times to be a female in the sculpture department - any woman who lived through those years will know what I mean... ha ha it was a nightmare.
- DM:** I don't think it was that different where I went in the 80s, when I was working in the sculpture department.  
When you were working through those formative years, were you a part of any networks outside or your peer group?
- ES:** Well I started to exhibit... I think I had work in... the first exhibition I had externally was in 1974, and I had a few pieces of work in an exhibition in London. To be honest, without looking at my CV I won't be able to remember exactly what that exhibition was. I started to exhibit anywhere that would take my work actually. It was difficult work.
- DM:** How did that come up? How were you invited to exhibit in that exhibition or in the Acme galleries of the Serpentine?
- ES:** They approached me. Interestingly enough, we did have some extraordinary people coming into Winchester School of Art. It was in interesting Art School in those days. We had Richard Demarco, who was a great supporter of my work. When very few others would show my work, Richard Demarco was great. He first took an interest in my work when I was at Winchester School of Art and showed it here [Edinburgh, Scotland] in the Festival.
- DM:** Which year was that?

**ES:** That was the year I was leaving, so I think it was the summer of 1976.

**DM:** Do you remember which works were shown?

**ES:** They were a series of prints. When I left Winchester, I was recording my installations and my sculptures and video works as sequences of photo lithos. That's why when I went into the Royal College of Art I went into the printmaking department as apposed to Sculpture or Film and Television. He [Demarco] showed a sequence of my prints, and (laughing) he may still have them in his collection.

**DM:** With the exhibition with the Acme Galleries, do you remember how that came about?

**ES:** They invited me. They saw my degree show, somebody from the Acme gallery saw my Degree Show.

**DM:** And with the Serpentine Show?

**ES:** I must have submitted my work and it was accepted. That was in 1975 so it was the year before I graduated. I was in my second year at Winchester School of Art.

**DM:** Did they do an open call or?

**ES:** They did an open call.

**DM:** And how did you know about it?

**ES:** Well I was making videos and I think I must have been just rather desperately hunting around to see who else was making videos. I must admit when I went to the show, to the opening, I was agog; I had no idea that this world of video artists existed. It was a revelation.

**DM:** How did you meet?

**ES:** I was so shy, and sort of bowled over by it all, so I scurried in and looked around. I think I saw my work, I had three pieces [in the show].

**DM:** Which were they?

**ES:** One was called, 'iamdead,' and one was called Conflict. Another was called Emotive Progression. I scurried around. I think I spent several hours - I remember seeing David Hall's work and was blown away by it, I remember I didn't speak to anyone. I didn't confess to being a part of it really, but yes it did influence me.

**DM:** Which works particularly do you remember?

**ES:** I think I saw an awful lot of work which I didn't think was very good. But it clarified my vision. I saw some work that was fantastic, David Hall's was particularly memorable obviously. It made me realise that the media is not the message, that it isn't just about being clever enough to use this equipment well. Still you have to have a really good idea, and there's a craft involved.

**DM:** Do you think that could have been heightened by the curation of the exhibition by the fact that the exhibition was all video works?

**ES:** Well I found it very exciting, there was just so much going on. I had never seen anything like that. It was incredibly innovative.

**DM:** When you were producing your works, did you feel that you were responding to part of a larger movement?

**ES:** Sadly I didn't, until I went to the Serpentine video show and then I felt if I'm honest I suppose, a little bit intimidated. I felt that I'd been doing this work and I didn't have a group around me that I could relate to.

**DM:** Can you talk about the response to your works in these exhibitions that you've made?

**ES:** Video works?

**DM:** Your works of that period, the technical format, but also the subject matter.

**ES:** When I started showing my work in 1976, the response, in one sense, was favourable, and in another sense, it wasn't particularly...

**DM:** Just to ask you about the response to your works when you presented them in these famous exhibitions, how did you find it?

**ES:** The Acme, when I showed my work in the Acme Gallery, there were posters all over London.

So you asked me what the response to my work was. Well when I exhibited in the Acme Gallery there were images like that (shown) that were made into a poster and put all over London, they used the shock aspect, I'm sorry I say they, the Acme Gallery, the marketing. I mean that was a bit difficult really, and I had to take that all on board, and I had to just go with it, grit my teeth and keep going, the reason it was difficult is you've got to hold on to the idea that's behind it and not get carried away, its easy to make more and more imagery that you know is going to get attention, for not necessarily the right reasons. But I had a concept in mind, I had an idea, and I had to keep pulling it back to that and moving forward with it.

[Then] I had a show at the Hayward - it was the Hayward Annual.

**DM:** Which year was that?

**ES:** That was 1980 I think, or 1981 and that's where I had to really decide which direction I was going to go in. That was an installation. I didn't want to be remembered just for making shocking images, but I had to work through that.

**DM:** They are shocking images.

**ES:** Some of them are, when I look back at them, but I was dealing with shocking things. This sort of imagery, that was another part of the Women's Soldiers Video, and this sort of thing, which was about Northern Ireland. Growing up in Northern Ireland, trying to make sense as a child of all that stuff.

**DM:** The question about the response to your work, I was kind of, understanding from the point of view from of the audiences, what was the critical response at the time like?

**ES:** It was usually favourable, in that people found it interesting, challenging, all the critics, all the reviews, complimentary in that it was challenging and interesting. I don't think I ever considered that it would be a sellable commodity. That wasn't an issue for me in those days at all, never has been, never.

**DM:** It wasn't an issue in the sense that it was only important to you or what would come to you externally?

**ES:** It wasn't important to me. I realised that it was an issue, because certain galleries were never going to show my work because it was never going to sell, I don't think.

**DM:** I find that quite surprising actually. Did you have any approaches from commercial galleries?

**ES:** No.

**DM:** Did you look for anybody to represent you?

**ES:** Well James Lingwood actually represented me for about a year until I moved to Scotland and then he couldn't continue to represent me in Scotland.

**DM:** Why not?

**ES:** Too far, it was early days for him I think, he showed my work in Aspects Gallery and did a tour of my work, and then I moved to Scotland in 1984.

**DM:** Where did that tour go do you remember?

**ES:** It went to, London, Exeter, I can't remember actually, it went around about 4 galleries. It went around about 4 galleries.

**DM:** Why did you move to Scotland in 1984?

**ES:** Well I was a single parent, 2 children, my eldest child had huge difficulties, he's severely autistic, and had to have something like 27 hospitalisations and he was only 7, so I moved to be closer to a big teaching hospital, so that's why I moved, it was a no brainer.

**DM:** And you came into a position at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design?

**ES:** Well that was by good fortune, I didn't have a job when I moved here, I cut all my ties with my exhibitions galleries down south, and I didn't have a job. I had just finished a 2 year fellowship at Winchester School of Art, moved up here, but actually, fortunately, I got a teaching job at Duncan and Jordanstone College of Art and Design, within about 6 months. That was very fortunate, but it took a lot longer to build up my exhibiting career in Scotland. In fact, took years and years and years, and so I exhibited my work abroad. It was easier to show my work in Germany and Switzerland than it was in the UK.

**DM:** Was there a specific period when you were not working with video?

**ES:** I think I stopped working with video after my residency at South Hill Park, so I stopped in 1983.

**DM:** Just after you made Doppelgänger and Women's Soldiers?

**ES:** Yes.

**DM:** And where were these works exhibited?

**ES:** They were exhibited in South Hill Park. There were 2, I had an exhibition at the end of each year, and I did a 2-year residency. I don't think they have been shown since then.

**DM:** So what did you do with that work? Did that inform the success of works?

**ES:** Yes.

**DM:** And then you stopped making video works?

**ES:** I really concentrated much more on print making, installation, photography and I carried on doing the installation work, working in sequence, I used myself in my work less and less as the years went on, I still use myself in my work, much more subtly now.

**DM:** And is that a response to the development of technology or how would you describe how you work with new media?

**ES:** I think it was as my life changed, I probably worked harder and produced more work when I moved to Scotland but it was much more in the way of print making and Sculpture. It's interesting if I think about it like that, I mean I always produced a lot of work but I found it more difficult when I came to Scotland for a long time.



**DM:** But there wasn't any specific set of reasons that you stopped working with video such as exhibition or commissioned work opportunities or access to technologies.

**ES:** I think it would be access to technology. I didn't feel that there was any space for it. I didn't think there was any interest in it, to be honest.

**DM:** From your own point of view?

**ES:** No, from any galleries, it was easier for me to show prints. It was easier for me to sell my work to Europe and abroad if it was in a print, because the video was never seen just as a video on its own. It had always to be seen in conjunction with an installation and with other works around it and it was always part of a kind of notion of performance. I think I always did it really, on the basis that it was not of any commercial value. There wasn't terribly much point in keeping it and as the years went on, it seemed less and less relevant.

**DM:** So does that mean that you saw it more as a, literally, a time based review that serves its purposes within a very specific situation?

**ES:** Absolutely. Completely. It was a means to an end. It was something along the way. It was a part of the bigger picture.

**DM:** At a specific time have you re-shown any of these early works where video played that role, in a different way? Have you re-staged?

**ES:** No, but interestingly enough the work that I do now - the work that I had in the exhibitions last September, for example, I showed a sequence of images which was produced as a sort of film, large scale. I do make a lot of digital animations now. A lot. It's become a large part of the work that I do now. I produced a digital animation for the work that I made for Australia. It was a work that I did in the Antarctic, South Georgia.

**DM:** And was your approach to the animation similar to what it was?

**ES:** Yes, very similar. So, the animation will be seen in the gallery on the wall, at the back of the gallery, and all the prints and the sculptures and the photographs and the drawings, everything will be seen around it, very similar. But now I involve much more sound. I work with sound sculpture, sound-scape, and sound has become very important. Interestingly for me, doing this interview, thinking back (because you don't often get an opportunity to do that really) when I think about the sound in those early videos, it was kind of incidental and there was stuff going on and I did use it. So, for example, one video that I did which was actually in the Serpentine - it was a series of structures - wooden frames and some metal frames and they had material stretched across them, tin foil and newspaper and tissue, different materials, and they were set down this really long hall. The lighting was all worked out in advance and then I walked through these structures and for that piece, the sound was as important as the imagery, because it was the sound of the tearing tin foil, or the breaking paper. That video was called Emotive Progression. And now, I use sound to evoke the atmosphere or the feeling of the place that I'm trying to create in an exhibition. So, the last exhibition I had was called Mapping Antarctica - it was about the dry valleys in

the Antarctic, South Georgia, which is an island in Antarctica, and the sound was made to evoke the feeling of those places and my response to those places.

**DM:** Going back to the works in the Serpentine, can you tell me the title of the 3 works again and also describe the other 2 works?

**ES:** One of them was called Conflict that was fairly obviously related to Northern Island, but it was indirectly about Northern Island. It was much more to do with the conflict of emotions and the confusion about being a young adult looking back at being a child. Growing up within that conflict, and what was I left with. I was left with this conflict of how to deal with things. Emotive Progression I've described to you.

**DM:** How long was Emotive Progression?

**ES:** I can't remember, about, maybe 3 and a half minutes, 4 minutes. Nothing was more than about 6 minutes. In my experience I realised that 6 minutes was enough, usually they are about 3 minutes.

The other one was called lamdead, as one word. I wrote my thesis – at least I tried to write my undergraduate dissertation on this piece, but nobody understood it really, so I re-wrote my dissertation on Paul Klee's illustrations to Candid, by Voltaire. lamdead was about dealing with loss, dealing with death, trying to look at it objectively, trying to make sense of it, trying to distance myself from the pain of it. To go back to that image that I showed, where I was working with glass, and cellophane and making a kind of perspective that was an illusion, I created a Perspex shape of myself, but it was done in a series of ovals, linked together, and I worked it like a puppet, but I was wearing a white shroud-like thing over myself, so was I female, male, young, old, whatever! I was obviously human and alive, but I was working this Perspex puppet, and it was like a sort of dance, I suppose I must have been aware of certain rituals and such as the Mexican 'Day of the Dead'.

**DM:** And how were the 3 works installed, presented?

**ES:** On a monitor, Just a television monitor on a plinth.

**DM:** And were most of the works presented, most of the single screen, single channel works, presented neutrally?

**ES:** Yes they were neutral, they were black and white, and very grey I seem to remember. I was very particular to get sharp focus and to get my lighting right so the thing was aesthetically pleasing. That it was beautiful, as beautiful as it could possibly be - it didn't matter that I was perhaps dealing with what one might consider as an ugly subject matter, I was very aware of the craft, making sure that it was as tightly resolved as possible.

**DM:** And who were you making these works for at the time?

**ES:** Good question. I think for everyone and no-one. Something just drove me on to just keep making more and more. I've never stopped working, never ever, and I'm in a room that's stuffed with all my work that I've got. I've got collections of work; it's a sort of madness.

**DM:** To what extent have you.... has curatorial dialogue stimulated your practice?

**ES:** Never.

**DM:** In those years you were working with video and making decisions about how to install and confront and engage the viewer, what kind of dialogue was there at that time?

**ES:** Not very much, because usually I was offered an exhibition and told what my parameters were, I was sort of told, this is what we require.

**DM:** What kind of engagement did you have with the viewers? Either practically or as aspiration yourself?

**ES:** Well, I'm really ashamed to say that in the early days, I was too shy to go to my own private views. Sort of avoid it as much as I could. I gave an interview on the BBC when I was at South Hill Park, obviously I've done interviews, and talked about my work. I think I'm an outsider.

**DM:** It means that you are a video artist.  
Let's talk about the content and subject matter of your work and how that's positioned. Just more conversation about peers, succession, because your work at the time is covering really a very broad subject matter, coming from your own direct personal experiences, and I'd also like to talk about the route that your work has taken from its initiation to now.

**ES:** It was much more than just about feminism, and the fact that I used myself naked. It is about vulnerability; it is about women in war, the role that a woman has, as the wife, as the daughter, as the mother, and that as such you are vulnerable and exposed. You are not armed. You are just there. It's also the nakedness - oddly enough, for me that was about making something universal. Making something universal and taking it away from fashion or style. Nor dating it - as clothing always does - even a hair band can do that.

**DM:** I think the media does that. Technologies do that as well.

**ES:** It does.

**DM:** And I think that you can see that now in the work.

**ES:** Do you think so?

**DM:** Yes.

**ES:** Yes, but, maybe when you're in your early 20s...

**DM:** But you can't make work with future technology.

**ES:** No, its interesting isn't it, looking back.



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