MW: Which of your works do you consider to be the most important and why?

GB: I've got quite a few I like. Whether they are the most important or not is a slightly different question. I suppose in the end, the Scratch works are probably the most important in that they accrued quite a lot of fame in their time. The works would be *Absence of Satan* and *Yes Frank No Smoke*. I think those two pieces stand up to time. Also, you've got to go right back to the beginning of the story. At the time, I was at the Slade. I'd left St Martin's and found it quite hard. I'd gone to various people, trying to show them stuff, but it was totally different then. No one was really interested in the younger artists. The scene wasn't encouraging, I spent two years and realised that I was going to get nowhere with that. So, I had the opportunity to go to the Slade and I really used that chance as a time to think about what might work if I couldn't get a dealer, or if I couldn't go on in that system. I became, like a lot of people, very interested in popular culture at that point. There seemed to be a time where a lot of excitement was going on in popular culture. There was ZG Magazine and various other ways in which cultural studies had come home to roost. A lot of interesting writers were talking about mainstream culture. You can see the heritage today in all the supplements. But at that point anyway, it seemed perhaps interesting to leave that rarefied world of fine art and to hook up with something in the mainstream. I was in one day at the Slade and this bloke called Peter Anderson had got some new editing equipment and in a very boyish way I liked the look of it. I wanted to know how it worked. Suddenly in that moment, I realised that doing something with video would be quite interesting. I'd not seen or thought of that before. Also in that moment, I realised you could record television. You could borrow images, mainstream images and do something with it. I remember artists like Jack Goldstein was beginning to play with these ideas and then there was Richard Prince, but he came a bit later with those Marlboro type adverts, so things were in the air. I think it also fitted in theoretically quite well regarding the idea of making your own marks and being rather fond of yourself and your own creativity. This working with other people's images seemed more solidly Marxist. You were taking someone else's thing and, rather like culture, not really progressing by originality, but more if people pass the baton and others build on it. So in that Marxist way, there's no really true originality. We were all just like cultural officers who build up a bit on other people's work. In a way I like that aspect of it because I'd recently come from St Martin's where I did a conceptual course. So those approaches to art making were very much discussed there. At that point I started copying lots of television and I used to give myself a headache whizzing through it, trying to find images I liked. I became interested in the idea of taking cultural detritus or images that people wouldn't think twice about. I particularly liked nature programmes and re-cutting them with disco music and things like that. I started out doing some quite innocent things and they had no real heavyweight artistic justification. They were just different to normal television, but not that different. You could show them in nightclubs and things like that. In a Warholian sense I quite enjoyed that escape from meaning. I came into the world thinking artistically at a point where people were very repressed and guilt ridden in the late 70's. You had punk, but in artistic circles, in colleges, you

essentially had this tremendous sense of a heavy burden on artists. You couldn't just express yourself. You had to connect up with issues, deal with class issues and issues of identity and things like that.

MW: And structuralism was very prevalent.

GB: Yes, it was very prevalent. I was different to those other artists. I think I started to see a bit of space between myself, even though I actually ended up doing structuralism. But it was structuralism plus fun. I think that would be a good way of putting it. But in the early beginnings of my career, that was context people found art in with artists like Stephen Willats and Victor Burgin. It was a moment where art couldn't just be. It had to be connected up with perhaps a social, political and theoretical viewpoint - ideally being the voice of the oppressed in some way, or art seeking to represent true revolutionary spirit or a spirit of change. I wasn't so much interested in that. As I said I was more interested in taking images and trying to re-edit them in a way that the original maker and the original cameraperson could never have imagined. I was trying to take the image rubbish of culture and try, in an artistic and visual way, to make something out of it that was quite different. That was well worth pursuing. For a 5 or 6-year period I did that and *Absence of Satan* and *Yes Frank No Smoke* are probably the best examples. But to carry on, lots of people have re-edited people's footage - Candice Breitz, for example. There are all kinds of characters who are doing this working with popular footage now, but hopefully history will recognise that at that point, when I made those two works, it was technically quite innovative. I had each sample on a floppy disk. It was called a Green Gate and each floppy could hold one line of text or one line of speech. So if someone said "Yes Frank," that would be one floppy disk, and we had to feed it into a keyboard and play it. And so the whole thing, both those tracks were constructed in big studios using my friend Pascal Gabriel. He is a big producer now who came to fame with S EXPRESS. He works with much more mainstream people now, but at the time he helped me put the tracks together. Everything's in tune and everything's rather lush and that's why those works are quite, quite different to a lot of people who edit found footage. They just stay in their edit suite and the soundtrack is what they've got. Of course they do what they can but it's nothing like the sound in that those two pieces. They were very slick. It's a bit like the Phil Spector version of video art than just a simple version.

MW: And how did you get access to the high end editing that you needed, was it through your friend?

GB: That's a long story. I actually managed to persuade RCA to pay for it. You've got to remember I had my hair and I was very young, very attractive and I went in and convinced them that they could re-flog their films all over again. This bloke, he was fairly bonkers, kind of got persuaded. He liked it and then we got a lawyer involved and I can't remember his name now but he was the head of RCA in the late 80's. It was the first time I'd come across someone with a speakerphone. He used to have a huge office and bellow at me. I was living in a squat and these calls would consist of his voice in a huge hall. I could never quite work it out. It was only when I got to his office that I saw he had a speakerphone. That's a small detail but this is what memory is made of.

MW: It sounds like another George Barber piece.

GB: Well yes, one's got to have an eye for these things. So, he felt persuaded that in a youth market you might be able to re-cut all their back catalogue and they thought "Oh fine, let's give it a go," so he put me in one of their own edit suites and I actually got the one inches of the films I used. I took the sound away, but it was a pretty good format so the ingredients were very good. I think if you are really fussy and you look into these things and you get a good copy of my work, you will see that that does separate it. I think it was innovative at the time and also it's classy, it's well made. It stood the test of time for a number of reasons like that.

MW: Are there any works, which are important to you personally but haven't been more widely acknowledged?

GB: I think it is a small department, video. I think some of my *Monologue* pieces are very good but they are difficult, unless you are English you don't really pick up on the English whimsy that they are about. The Dutch are very good English speakers. They've been quite fond of some of them and got them, but I think things like *Passing Ship*, there's a number of *Monologues* that I think are quite good but they do quiet trade because there's a lot of language in the end. That was actually one of the reasons why I made *Shouting Match*. In the back of my mind was that sensation that if you get away from language and you go beyond it, you've got a much bigger market. And indeed, *Shouting Match* has been shown in China. It has been shown in all sorts of places just as I predicted, because English does limit it, especially if you've got lengthy use of dialogues. It's not for everyone.

MW: Can you talk a bit more about your influences? I imagine they are very eclectic.

GB: I think to start all that, you'd have to look at the pattern. I'm not one of those people who have stuck with a solution to making art. You move on. I found that the Scratch took me so far, but after a while, for the very reasons that I liked it initially, it became just a little bit repetitive. I don't know if you've ever watched half an hour of scratch but that's about the most anyone can watch, because it doesn't actually offer you any way into anything. It's about sound-scapes and visual pleasure. After a while I found it wasn't giving me any pleasure. I wanted something a little bit more and I'd always liked writing, so there was a side to me after Scratch. I went right to the opposite and started to do little small dramas. I did one called *Taxi Driver II,* which I think is very good, but again they are all fairly unknown. But that, for its time, was a big jump away from what I'd done before and many people would tell you it's not a wise decision in art terms. They like you to stick with a few solutions and keep on going. It's like having a trademark. But I moved to that, and in a way dealing with actors and things like that, brought its own problems. I found you need much more funding if you are going to be involved in scripts and things like that. There was another one called *Venetian Ghost,* but you are squarely in that thing like filmmakers chasing money all the time. Slowly I felt defeated a little bit by it. It's hard going. In the British art circle, especially a few years ago, you could only get so much off the Arts Council or the BFI. There wasn't an endless supply of people you could hit for funds. Once you'd had a couple of grants in living memory from them, it all dried up quite quickly. Then you would take your place on their Board deciding to give it to other people. So chasing money slowed that down. Then I started to think about getting my own ingredients in the edit suite. *Monologues* represented something an artist could do because in the end, even in the

simplest terms, we are unique. There's no one else. Even though there are many Georges, there is only one kind of me. It's quite a legitimate area for an artist to explore. There was some kind of confessional reason to them. They had some sense of their own sensibility. So I started to do these monologues with a slight sense of what became defined as slacker-dom. It was a kind of slacker attitude to life. I quite liked constructing these stories because they took you on a journey that was often quite surreal. It seemed to me at the time, a legitimate way of using all my faculties. It had a lot of meaning. It had a lot of observations, which were good and artistic. It seemed to be a part of me that needed to be out there. So after I did a lot of narratives, I was more drawn to not using language so much and trying to do events like *Shouting Match* or indeed actually going back to re-cutting films. I did some quite interesting scratch pieces not so long ago, of which *What's That Sound* is a good one. You still need money, but I've got the editing on a computer. Everything is so easy now, but you have to get back to the point where you can produce without too much trouble. I get a little bit of money from the university where I work, not a vast amount, but enough to do a few things a year and that's what I've been doing.

MW: You've mentioned funding. How have you funded work over the years, from the very early scratch through to more recent work?

GB: In the beginning, I put a lot of those scratch pieces together in something called The Greatest Hits of Scratch Video. No one else had quite taken that sheer unashamedly, commercial route because everyone was so guilt ridden at the time. But I put it out as a video release. There was never any money in it but I managed to persuade people in Tower Records, all round the place to stock it and they did sell. It paid for itself. Although the other artists might have thought there was millions in it, I think for all my efforts I probably got £1000 out of it over about 4 years. It was not a money-spinner. I could never understand why a lot of these other places like the Arts Council and the BFI didn't put out work and sell it. There they were presiding over these canons of artist film and video and no one ever really knew about it. I could never work out why. Half an hour of it for five or six pounds, would have paid for itself. I was able to sell my stuff. The reason I did it was that it got me a lot of attention. It got scratch video a lot of attention and that's why it was worth doing. There were endless small articles in magazines like the Face and newspapers and a group of us were on the cover of the Sunday Times magazine at one point with this stuff. People liked the story. I think another reason it was good was because I didn't call it video art. I deliberately tried to come up with a term that was different. So, scratch video played more into the media landscape. People saw it as the new thing. Of course most of them thought that there were all these black guys hooking up their VHS machines down in Brixton, but in fact it was all middle class kids in big edit suites who were probably destined to be in television. They didn't want that story but the one they did want I was happy to give them. It was very street art, the story it got. But to get back to your question, after a while, scratch just like everything else, got a lot of noise then it died down. I carried on making work, but the moment passed and like everyone else, I ended up applying to the Arts Council, the BFI, and it seemed to be really only those, I can't really remember anyone else. My only recollections, everyone was always walking around moaning that they couldn't get any equipment, but that all changed very rapidly. We are now in an age where everyone has got equipment and you'd have to be pretty weird not to be able to borrow a camera off someone. But, no one actually produces any more films. So it is one of those strange conundrums. I certainly remember everyone I knew at the

Slade would say, "Oh yeah, the reason I'm not making anything is I can't get any equipment". But now there's equipment everywhere, editing's really easy, but there isn't a great increase in people doing stuff. In fact what's happened I think is there's far more repetition of fairly everyday ideas, but not that actual top-notch or original or really high quality. It remains much the same as it ever did. I think there are just loads more people making the same work, which is point your camera out of the car window going up a motorway. You'd need drugs to watch that kind of stuff. There are certainly enough people who are new to the medium who seem to think, "Wow! This is something else."

MW: Did you ever receive funding from Channel 4 or the BBC?

GB: Yes, I did. *Taxi Driver II* and *Venetian Ghost* had Channel 4 money. Also Channel 4 to their credit, used to have a few brilliant strands. I was on one for 4 minutes with *Upside Down Minutiae*. It was a brilliant slot, just before the 7 o'clock news. It was great showing. They stopped it, but was harmless really. It took up a tiny slot and God, the amount of people who saw it was enormous. I still meet people today who go, "Oh, you made that?". They remember it. I asked for the ratings. I think it was nearly 400,000 people saw that piece. In that one moment, that's probably more than anyone than has ever seen any of my other stuff. A lot of English galleries that you get work in, regional galleries for instance, they really struggle. 60 a day would be a really busy day for visitors. It's more like 13 in some places, even places that seem quite big. People go into the café from the local offices and there is a little bit of passing trade, but it's generally quite empty. So Channel 4 were hugely important at that moment. There was this connection with popular culture that they felt, I think it was part of their remit, to try and bring in the under-belly of alternative television. There was definitely an imperative and part of their remit was to get unusual people and unusual things on television. Now it's very bleak. There's no real point where video art might meet a popular spot. It's a great shame because it's all ratings driven. A lot of people in television will talk about the demise of high art. There are very few hard documentaries now, even in newspapers. The Observer is nothing like it used to be. It's like something like Dorling Kindersley have had a hand in. As an older man I am reacting quite badly to these trivial, consumerist issues to put it in a nutshell. But I think during that mid-80's period, Channel 4 were brilliant. They put on quite a few little stings and things and then the Late Show had a couple of one or two minute pieces. Gillian Wearing made the wonderful *Two into One*, which was paid for by the BBC and the Arts Council. Those kinds of TV initiatives were great for artists because people definitely saw it. A lot of people had arguments with that, because it was all so short. If you were a heavyweight Structuralist, making boring work, they were less inclined to pick you. I imagine you resented being told to hurry up. So it suited certain video artists, or it suited a certain kind of work, but then that's the medium. No one's going to give you 15 minutes to just put a fruit bowl on at prime time are they? It's just not going to happen.

MW: Nowadays video art or moving image art is more gallery-driven. Have you ever had any kind of gallery sponsorship or commissions from galleries?

GB: Yes, I was slightly hip at all the wrong time. When the explosion of interest in video happened, I was having to find a career working in higher education, or I couldn't have supported myself as an artist. So I wasn't in the swim. I didn't really know the people

but I've had The Open Eye, Westminster did a good show of mine and I've had things at Miami Basel and a few events in Berlin. They've been respectable but there's not been a great deal of them. I don't have a private dealer. But to go back to the change, relatively speaking artists got greedy and really the trouble with video art is you are destined to just sell limited editions. They are really hard to flog. It's possibly getting easier now because they are so hard to flog. I think there is a certain rich crowd, who like taking on the difficult stuff no one else would buy. So, maybe it's changing. But artists who are from the second generation after Acconci, like Gary Hill and Bill Viola is a good example, were quick to try and make big things that would get in museums and big things that you could buy and sell and trade. Whereas the earlier bunch like Bruce Nauman, were more politically driven and not interested in that. Certainly people who taught me and the people I was around were more that way inclined. The 80's hadn't happened yet. The thing about decades is that they start halfway through, I've noticed. The eighties decade actually finished in 1985 and similarly the 2000s finished in 2005. The periods all bleed over for about 5 years and start late, people go on about the 80's but in fact the earlier '80s were very much the 70's still carrying on. If you look at the Structuralist stuff, their big period was the early 80's, but people think of it as the 70's phenomenon. After the big change with galleries, people got more and more inclined to think of objects and things to sell and that's certainly the way it is now. So, if you are a video artist, you want to take up space and ideally that's an installation or a piece of work that includes a projector and a shape on the wall. It is so that you've got like the painters, something that a person can buy and have in the house. The last thing you want is screening single-screen stuff that you've got to then say it's a limited edition of 5 and you can have this DVD for £2000. It's like "What am I buying here?" You give them a contract saying that you'll always replace it, but it's a flimsy wicket. So the impetus is down. It's money that has driven it. For the newer people, there's no question of finding funding. They don't even think about it. It's about getting a gallery and trying to produce enough objects each year that could be sold, so that you could hit £30,000 or so and have a life. That kind of solution wasn't something that occurred to me. It's a shame but I was just doing it all a bit too early. I think the big change was about 1988 in terms of art, just when Damien Hirst and Saatchi started their thing. I went to their earliest show at Boundary Row and it was amazing. When I first saw the shark in the tank I jumped, I just thought, "Wow, this guy is really thinking differently". I hadn't bumped into anyone thinking like that at any of the art schools. And yet I could see how it connected to history. It's just we weren't thinking so big or thinking so joyously. It was really liberated from all that oppression and that stultifying guilt that a certain sort of art school went through in a certain period. You couldn't compare that kind of mentality with the Film Co-op. There is a real aesthetic pleasure. You can see how he was playing with the world in a much more, light of feet, light of mood way than that heavy seriousness that people around the Film Co-op had to deal with the world.

MW: You have quite a lot of humour in your own work?

GB: Yes, well I'm not quite like that. I made Structuralism in the end, but I didn't quite fit it in. I fulfilled all those things, those works I talked about *Yes Frank No Smoke*, *Absence of Satan* were all about the materiality of television, not exactly the dots, but definitely trying to edit it in such a way that there was no meaning. It was almost like mantras, rather like a pop song chorus. You get to really look forward to when it comes in and you get a slight rush for the few times that you enjoy playing it, but they soon deteriorate. With things like "Ain't no stopping us now" and those great disco

records, when it comes up to the chorus it's a real high point. I was trying to take away the narrative of these films and try and have little mantras and bits that repeated that you just went, "Oh yeah, I wanna hear that again". It was slightly unusual and it did work. Theoretically though that actually just perfectly matches what people at the Co-op or Malcolm LeGrice and Peter Gedal were on about. I was just doing it in a far more populist, far more fun fashion. I think if you look at it, I didn't realise it at the time, but I was actually beating the same path as them. I was coming up with a different thing with disco music.

MW: Apart from the Tower Records and the RCA deals that you managed to strike, did you distribute work through LVA and the usual channels?

GB: Initially, I don't think they liked me much. I never felt very welcome. I didn't quite get it and I think they had their own theme scene going. I can't remember the sort of people. It was before Jez Welsh. Jez was always OK but it was the earlier crowd. I think I'd been around to see them in 1980 or so and they seemed to be just looking after each other. I'm sure they were struggling to survive and everything, so they were just looking after each other and making work with that equipment together. It seemed a very inward looking bunch. It's a theme that's constantly in British video art, but it's a little bit as if they were their only fans. They were the audience for their own tapes and it didn't really seem to reach out much further. I gave up. I didn't bother with them much but I think when Jez Welsh was in charge, which would have been the early 80's, he was much more open and keen to have anyone who was doing anything interesting in the collection. But they were just distributors. They weren't the architects for the funky shows. They certainly weren't putting on things in empty warehouses or things like that. If it had been in the mood of the time they probably would have done, but that's what I was trying to get at in a way. No one was interested. It's hard to explain, but if you'd have said to someone in the mid 80's, "Would you like to go to a shitty warehouse in the middle of nowhere and see a bunch of unknown artists' work?" they would have said "No way."

MW: It happened in the 70's quite a bit with Butler's Wharf.

GB: Yes, it did. I had forgotten that. I did go down there a few times, but it was hard work and there came a moment where it suddenly seemed the sexiest thing you could do was go to the middle of nowhere to a waste ground and have a party or watch some art, so that was a big cultural shift. I think it's inspiring because people are after the very new or the young rather than looking for the well established, trademark people. I mean if you think back as well, artists like Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon, there were people, various characters that I'd met but there wasn't a lot of them. It was not like now and this huge depth of people making art. I mean the economy must be quadrupled, more than that. I would have thought 10 times bigger. Back then it was a small bunch of people making art and living off it. It was a tiny bunch and there was nobody making video who was selling it, except the Americans.

MW: How did you get access to equipment? Did you have your own camera?

GB: No, I never had my own camera, not for a long time. They were so ugly for one thing. They were just constantly being improved. The first cameras were just enormous. I remember feeling that everything about it was unappealing whereas now they're very

appealing. Getting equipment, I used to get quite miserable. There were a lot of people I knew with equipment knocking about doing nothing. In the mid 80's, there were an awful lot of pop-video companies set up and a lot of energy seemed in there. I ended up doing a few but I also got to know people with edit suites and editing equipment and that worked quite well. I used to go into the basement of what's now Flextech. There was a guy there. I could give him a few bob and we used to have all the best stuff available. I made *Passing Ship* there and those things so I was never keen on having equipment, it was too expensive anyway. I think it was £12,000 then for a little U-matic edit suite, which was an absolute fortune. Then it would be out of date in 5 years. Anyway, there's no way that I had anything like that kind of money but other people, small production companies did, and so I set up just by constantly trying. You found places and there was a company that Terry Flaxton had. He was very nice. I had to pay though. He never gave me anything free. For £100 I used to have three machines for a whole day or something while he used to be making something shamelessly commercial. I forgot what it was but it was something fairly dire. He became a cameraman. He did that famous interview with Madonna. Apparently, he is doing quite well.

MW: He did a fantastic interview with Annie Lennox as well. And access to cameras, you got that through the same way?

GB: I'm mixing up the periods. There was a time I wasn't interested in shooting my own footage, so then I was just using found footage and getting it often on 1-inch recordings from TV places. So I was getting good quality. When I started doing *Monologues*, I think at that point I probably did have my own camera but I used to connect it up to the U-matics so the image was pretty good. It was a crap camera, a VHS camera but I could take a lead out direct to U-matic, so it was perfectly OK then. I used that for a while. I never felt stopped by the equipment situation. The equipment problems never really held me back, no.

MW: Given that the equipment was very ugly and cumbersome, what made you want to use video as opposed to film or whatever?

GB: The first time I'd used video was one of those quarter inch PortaPaks. I went out with this guy, we were on a conceptual course at St Martin's and I went out with this fellow around Soho and I think when we came back and watched it. It actually made us feel physically sick. I don't know exactly what the setting was but maybe it had had a strobing effect but it had a real 'wow' factor. You felt quite ill watching half an hour of it. So my first meeting with video was not a happy one. But then I went to the Slade. I was looking for an angle. I was looking for something that would really lift my career or get me going, when I saw this Sony 5 edit suite. I thought, "Wow, this is it, this is interesting". I thought the images on that were fine. They didn't make you feel sick it was pretty well sorted out by then. The early video artists really struggled to actually edit with achievement. Mine was frame accurate with a plus or minus of three or four or whatever, but it could certainly work fairly fast whereas the earlier stuff was clunky and prone to breaking down all the time. Regarding the question as to what drew me to video, I suppose I was interested in taking other people's footage and putting it to new purposes. That's really what drew me to it.

MW: When you went on to shoot your own stuff on normal camera, why did you use video then because you reference film a lot in your work?

GB: If you are going to do a monologue, you couldn't consider shooting it on film. It was just money. The great thing about *Monologues* is you write it and then you had a few practices and then often the first take's the best. But you might be able to cut together a couple of bits because it becomes a performers talent. I think an artist has a right to make something that's just peculiar or particular to them. It's a good avenue. It's a good legitimate avenue. You can't really compete with mainstream television because you need huge budgets and expensive equipment, so it was just you talking. If you can construct some kind of legitimate alternative universe and it's something quite unusual, out of the ordinary, that's seems like quite a good way to go. It seems like quite a good tactic.

MW: And video was the good medium for that?

GB: Yes that's right. I wasn't thinking about money or trying to sell it. That wasn't ever something I thought about, much to my shame.

MW: Have you always worked on your own, or have you ever collaborated?

GB: I have mostly worked on my own. I know it makes a lot of sense to join into groups. I suppose Scratch would be the big exception. I did get a lot of people involved in that and that's probably why we got a lot of press. There must have been about 10 or 12 of us. We didn't really hang out together but I think I made it happen because I put a focus to it. I said, "We put this one out called Scratch Video Volume 1". I suppose we really got the idea from some bloke called Oscar. I don't remember what his second name was. I never saw him again. But as you do when you are young, I slept over after some party in South London. I was hanging around some guy's council flat and all he kept on going on about was, "You should put it out, man," with all this general ridiculous drug induced confidence. But he kept on going and when I got back to my squat, I found myself thinking, "Yes, maybe I should put it out there." So, I started thinking, "Well, we don't want to call it video art. We'll call it something else." But at that point, when I produced this first one, I think only the people around me and I knew what constituted Scratch Video. Volume 2 is actually very good. It's a lot better than Volume One. One has got a few moments, which are excellent, but it's got a bit of garbage in it.

MW: Who were the other people around at that time?

GB: Volume 1 included John Scarlet Davis. There was Kim Flitcroft and Sarah Goldbacher. There was the Duvet Brothers. The Gorilla people came on the next one, Volume 2, but there was also a guy, Jeffrey Hinton, who I only met him once to pick up the tape. He'd done something with the pre-facial scrub, which got on but I never saw him again. I never knew what happened to him or anything like that. Once we knew what we were producing and once we got the name Scratch Video, we were more inspired to make work. The work we made was better because, a bit like dogma, we would set up the rules. It did have a good effect on us, and also the fact that they knew I was putting it out, if it works people are interested. In 1985 I was even on the Edinburgh Television Festival. They put Scratch on and first they put Janet Street-Porter and Alan Yentob.

Peter York and various kinds of people were suddenly into it and I met them. Scratch did become a great calling card for me. A lot of influential people wanted to know about it and certainly I was inundated with invites from ad agencies to come in and show my stuff. I was quite naïve but soon I realised they like new ideas but they always want to get their own guys to do it. It was a great shame. It's a bit miserable really but you go in there thinking that there is slight chance and of course they lead you to believe that they might get you involved in something but really it's pretty grim. They just want to get your feel and then they get one of the old buggers to do it properly. It was that kind of attitude. But Scratch became a very good calling card to all kinds of people. I went on to do some stage shows for Robert Plant and The Who. They are still touring now, but they were pretty old when they invited me to tart up their shows. The thing was they were all getting on and they didn't want close-ups. If they had a bit of video garbage up there that looked pretty it protected them from the big close up and so that's where I fitted in. So Scratch actually did translate financially for me because I did do various well paid commercial things that used video. After spending so much time mixing stuff I was quick and I could operate a lot of machines myself. I had techniques to produce these things. And then U2 used me. I did *1001 Colours Andy Never Thought Of* with the Marilyn Monroe image. It was not bad at all actually and I think I bought a car from that. So there were a few high points.

MW: And was that done for U2?

GB: Yes, it was a mix for they're Pop Tour. Pop Art was the theme. So, financially in fact Scratch, and the noise around it, lead me on to make links and I was able to be quite creative and hook up with people who needed things. But at that time at the same period in fact, there didn't seem to be much interest in video art. I was still doing it at home in between. It was a nice life actually. I seem to remember I played an awful lot of tennis because in between these gigs, where you'd be paid a decent wad, you could go and play tennis for 8 weeks and do nothing. I liked the life in that way. It's not something you should be proud of but I used the system and in a way I was giving myself creative time to do other things. I did a lot of writing and various things like that, but there wasn't really any funding for it. There was no big gallery scene that was showing video. It was a bit indulgent.

MW: Did you do any more commercial or music driven things?

GB: Not really. I got a couple of days a week teaching at a college and found it to be very enjoyable, especially when I got some good students. Once I had a life like that I didn't really bother. Up until quite recently I've been doing some websites and things. If I meet someone who needs something, I'd be quite keen to see if I can do it. If you can't do something yourself you can always find someone to work with you to do it. I've done a few even in recent times, but I suppose the last five years I'm pretty much settled into working for a college for a few days a week.

MW: That's in Surrey?

GB: Yes, it's called UCCA now, University College for the Creative Arts. You need to be very clear when you say it, UCCA at Farnham. It's UCCA at Epsom as well. There's UCCA at Canterbury. There are a lot of UCCAs.

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MW: You've just mentioned doing websites, so you've obviously taught yourself that art form.

GB: I'm not that great, but when you get older what you are very good at is just understanding what's needed, cutting through and not wasting time because, websites are really a waste of time. The client never knows what they want until they see what they don't want and you are off on this escapade event. No one really knows what they want. It's a very wasteful business. But, if you are slightly older and you are used to these kinds of demands you get to focus on letting them show you what they like on the net and which bits they like. Then you can get a much clearer image on the back of other people's stuff rather than you doing it. But you learn those kind of things from experience.

MW: What kind of organisations have you done websites for?

GB: I've done market research, press and a PR company. A lot of them are old friends or people I knew from years ago who recognise that I was quite creative and just trusted me. Also I'm cheap because I'm not running an office. That's the other thing with these companies. If you go to a website designer with their own office it's going to be expensive because they've got to pay for that office. But, if you find someone who is just doing it in the house and they can still do it, then that's best. That's a nice thing about modern technologies. You really don't need, big companies. You can find small people who can do a perfectly reasonable job whenever without all the fancy stuff.

MW: Do you have all your own technology for editing?

GB: Yes, you need to keep buying the new stuff to keep with the swim. I'm certainly not getting HD yet, I probably will but I'll wait. I've had a piece made on high definition: *Automotive Action Painting*, which is done very well actually. It's been all round the place. It was at the Tate for a month just behind the shop. I've never actually seen it in high definition though it was made in high definition because no one's got the projector. So, it doesn't seem like the right moment to get into that yet.

MW: Can you talk about critical feedback on your work and things that have been written about you, or things that you've written?

GB: The most important person I think was *Michael O'Pray*. He took me under his wing when I first started making Scratch, and wrote about it in Art Monthly. He just used to introduce people to it and I think it got to the stage where I'd give him lots of copies of my stuff. He was always telling me that his children used to watch *Yes Frank No Smoke* and knew all the words. Children like to watch things in a repetitive fashion so my work became their kind of Postman Pat in that household. I was very close to him and I still am actually. I hardly ever see him because you know how it goes, no particular reason, but it's always nice to see him. He was pivotal in that he gave Scratch the firm critical approval. You have to remember what it was set against. In that culture I was making video art that was set in a predominantly dry, Structuralist environment. I don't think the others were particularly enamoured with it. I think David Hall was unusual. I remember I once showed some work and you'd have thought he would have hated it, but actually of all the Scratch stuff, someone told me that he thought mine was best. It doesn't take much to please people sometimes. But the

point was, there was someone who was very much the bovver boy of video art, very tough on his principles and in a sense, no disrespect to him, but they almost seemed keen to make sure that there were limited people in the pub, if you like. It was like the British video artists were running a pub that had their own clients and no one else could come in. It was that kind of door policy. So I was making this slightly more trivial material. Obviously I'm being a bit flippant, but I was involved in different things. I was trying to use footage and actually stress the aesthetic and I was making mantras of sound. That didn't really fit in with what they were trying to do. So when Mike came along and endorsed it, it helped a lot because you were never really that sure about things. When I was very young, like when I was at the Slade, I really just wanted to irritate the tutors. It seemed that that was how art worked. The world was like that and now it's like this. As a young art student you are foolish if you make work just like them. You just repeat them. I think the worst student in the world is someone who makes stuff like their tutor. So I was keen never to do that. It is not altogether always the truth. In fact I was very much under the spell of John Stezaker at St Martin's. He used to do collage. I couldn't draw and if you couldn't draw, cutting up magazines and using other people's stuff was quite a good thing but that's slightly irrelevant. At the Slade I was keen more to kick my own way and one of the reasons I used dance music was that I knew it would irritate my tutors. My final show consisted of loads of poor televisions on their last legs. I managed to get about 30 and a video amplifier. I produced this video garden or nightclub. They had lots of loud music in there and fortunately no one else was showing in the same area. Funnily enough when I was taking it down, Mark Boyle had written a lovely little note saying that he really enjoyed the show and thought that it was the best thing at the Slade. That was quite nice of him. But to get back to the critical element, I felt out on a limb but once people started saying good things about Scratch, and it was endorsed, I grew in confidence. Because the period was dominated by this sense of guilt, feeling that art had to connect up with political issues and that art had to be at the service of justice and enlightenment, it was quite a heavy load if you were young. It was a little bit stultifying. I think a lot of art students of that period got disenchanted. The tutors were quite heavy. It was the nearest we got to an equivalent of what was going on in Russia in terms of authority, or the official speak. If you didn't fit in you had a hard time. I remember lots of people in St Martin's in tears in the painting department, who were not following the line, not towing the line. They would be undermined by people. If you did figuration you'd be trivial. Of course within about 4 years it was all to change and Peter Doig and people like that came along. But the tutors at that point anyway, rather like how you imagine a Stalinist or a communist regime, very much adopted the official line and people stuck to it. I think there was a little bit of that in video art. Not that I'm that much younger than them, but I was doing work away from that and I was deliberately trying to do something else. I reacted badly to that worthiness and in a way I was right. It was all to change very fast and we swung into Thatcher's 80's, but you need creative space and if you feel it's occupied and policed, it's not very encouraging. I remember quite a few people at St Martin's who were talented but really losing their way because they didn't want to tow the official line. They couldn't work out their own space. But having said that, of the critics, I think another person who'd be very important to mention would be John Wyver. It wasn't that he particularly championed me, he was very nice to everybody, but it was that he was great in that he wrote about these things and he organised some early TV shows about art. He was certainly one of a dying breed of television people who were interested in art at 100%. They weren't going to water it down or make any concessions. He was an intellectual. There isn't much space for

that kind of thing on television anymore. I think John has realised that too. So the important critical figures were Mike O'Pray, and John Wyver who was part of the scene in bringing some attention to British video art and mentioning it. After that, Julian Petley wrote about me a couple of times. He did some profiles. I wrote as well. I wrote a few things. I could always write, so I contributed to a few magazines pieces. Things come and go but in recent times I've contributed to Filmwaves. I was the guest editor not so long ago and I wrote a thing called *The Signs of LA,* which is about some photographic work I did taking large format pictures. I did have an exhibition at Westminster, London West Gallery, where I drove around LA looking out for signs. I was playing with the fact that some of the signs aren't real, but I was actually playing with the American unconscious because I think you feel that the signs are real. I was trying to pick up on when you are a stranger and you travel to some place that you don't know much about, you can pick up on the anxieties and the ideas in the culture in a way faster than the locals. You are more sensitive to it and a lot of messages on lawns around LA are quite aggressive. I was picking up on that. One of the photos for example, is just a big campervan and a door that says, "Do not press doorbell". I think I wrote an interesting piece about the messages that LA sends out to the public because of course there are no real pedestrians in LA. So again, you are a bit of weirdo if you are walking. Certainly, the distances are so huge. It doesn't pay off wondering around LA.

MW: Did you write about Scratch yourself?

GB: Only when people asked me to. I didn't write anything too big. I had to explain it a few times to people so I thought of it as blurb at the time. It was something things that magazines could quickly reassemble. In fact, most of the time they just printed whatever you wrote verbatim. So there was no real time for re-writing. Of course the archive at Central St Martin's keeps all this stuff, but I can't recall writing anything heavy-duty or any fancy publication writing. I haven't written anything in any respected publication.

MW: More recently I know Paul Morley and Gareth Evans have written something about your work.

GB: Yes Gareth Evans was great. There's always that point in art when it's nice if you are an artist, to suddenly realise that someone has actually thought about you in a constructed beginning to the end overview. One does it a little bit oneself, but it's always fascinating and I dare say one's ego is touched. But, to see someone make the effort to sum up the different periods and the different things you've done, it was a great accolade and it's well written. Catalogues aren't the place for criticism. They're just short of puff pieces. That's their job. They are not there to criticise you. They are just there to celebrate whatever you've been up to. Paul Morley's thing is a little bit weird, but that was what he was asked to do. That catalogue is one of the best round ups that have happened.

MW: Which show was that catalogue for?

GB: It was for Film and Video Umbrella. It came quite soon after I had an exhibition called Shouting Match at the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool, though I don't think they weren't connected. The George Barber thing features *Shouting Match* a lot and I think perhaps

at that moment, when I had a solo exhibition, it seemed more like a good idea to do a catalogue.

MW: Did Film and Video Umbrella pay for it?

GB: Yes, although I think that it was Arts Council money in the end. Everything goes back to them.

MW: Can you talk about works like *Shouting Match*, which are a bit more performance based?

GB: *Refusing Potatoes* is another monologue that I like and that one is slightly about the death of my father but it's also got a passing theme of Alan Rickman. I was born in the West Indies so I've always got that slightly unusual past that people don't realise. I lived there for a long time. I used to come to England for school, so I used to fly back and forward. My dad worked for the Booker Prize people, then he worked for a Sugar company. I often wonder how much that plays a part. If you grow up in any foreign place you've a delight in the oddity of it all. For example when motorcycle helmets first came out the donkey cart riders were quite keen to buy them because they thought they looked really cool, there was things like that. Someone used to come to the house on a Honda 90 with avocados. I have memories of things that are very un-English: of things done in a different way. I think you get an eye for whimsy like that. You gain a sense of sensitivity and delight in odd things. I've always had an anathema to too much conventional activity. I suppose many people are the same. But, where people have a kind of unified existence like in those terrible suburban places, which I spent some time in as a kid, there is a British stultifying drive to uniformity and not being noticed. It really is so different to what you experience if you grow up in the West Indies or somewhere like that. There isn't any equivalent like that really. It's much more lively. There is a sense of just being in contact with your own voice and making a noise and wanting to do things. I think that how one starts off can be traced into the work. Gareth Evans did a good job of connecting all my bits up, as it were. I also think the monologues come from a kind of pleasure in trying to take people on a story that is odd, but is ultimately good art. I don't think it feels like anyone else is quite doing a similar thing. Of course there are comedians, but they do it differently. I don't have their talents in a way. It's not so rehearsed and in a way it's a literary conceit about building a world that might be or might not be. But, you just enjoy it hopefully as a kind of trick for the period of time that it lasts. Hopefully it makes you think a bit differently for a while. It's as simple as that.

MW: Would you say that the early Scratch pieces and the work that you've done subsequently, are related in that way? Are they related in making you think differently about something that people might accept as the status quo or normality?

GB: Yes, it's about breaking conventions and somehow having that confidence to reach out and point out the oddness or absurdity in just cutting something in a different way. It's playfulness. It sounds a bit bland because any art can be described in that way, but perhaps it is. The idea is the thing itself should be vibrant and that you should, for the period you are watching it, be entertained. I'm not part of a movement or some wider political activity. I've never seen myself that way. I never wanted to fit in with any bigger team or movement. I've never felt like that.

MW: Let's talk a bit about some of the work that you are doing now.

GB: Now I've more settled down into coming up with more conceptual ideas. They are much more in that tradition. I think *Shouting Match* is probably one of the best ones or best known as well, but you come up with an idea and it goes right back to the beginnings of the tradition of video art. Abramovich and those early performance based pieces of video art were absolutely exceptional. If you construct an idea that is whole-heartedly artistic, you execute it well and you stick to the rules you've built up for yourself and if the participants in some way suffer or have to struggle to be part of your idea, it produces a rawness and that's something that I am quite interested in. It interests me when the participants have some kind of task, when the workforce is down into some kind of transformation or having to put up with some degree of pain. I'm interested in changing their perspective. The things about hanging people upside down, like *Upside Down*, *Minutiae* or *River Sky*, are quite elegant in the sense that you are literally changing someone's perspective. But then, like a radio programme you are keeping in all the bits like the frame of how they are suspended, you are not hiding anything. A simple piece is getting 3 or 4 people upside down, going up and down the river and then interviewing them later about their childhood. You assemble it together and it makes quite a nice package. Another funny thing is that, one of my friend's sons was looking at my work and said, "Oh no, the Americans wouldn't like this. It's far too much like television". It was because I had credits and some voiceovers. He was keen to point out that you don't want credits because it looks too much like TV and you certainly don't want voice-over, that was far too TV literate for video art. You wanted to keep it raw. He was making a very good point. The reason I got on to this is because I've tried to not follow any fashions. I couldn't really care whether they thought it was not video art. As far as I can see it, you'd have to be an idiot not to see that it was video art. I think video art is improved if lots of people are doing it differently. I also think I've used voice-over and various elements like that to shift it along. I'm not so interested in art time, if there is such a thing. It used to be that you could construct a dualism of art being constructed in art time and TV is constructed in TV time and they are both two separate things. Quite simply put, artists tend to waffle on and don't really cut it. There is no reason why. It doesn't really matter if it's 12 minutes or 15 minutes, no one's going to object. So you get a waffle going on with a lot of pieces. It's a bit bitchy but I remember John Maybury could never seem to understand when to cut, even though he was a lovely guy, and hopefully he will never see this. He was a very talented guy but he just didn't know when to turn it off. It's the same in writing. A sentence that ends crisply will carry a lot more weight and a lot more meaning than one that has another sub-clause. You just have to naturally get a sense of it and I think in video art I've towed my own thing and I don't think you will find anything of mine outstayed its welcome. If you are interested in it, it's possibly more cut in TV time than art time. I like it to feel sharp and I don't just say, "Oh Gosh I love that shot, I'll just keep it in because I love that shot", which I know a lot of artists do. I don't do that actually, generally by the time I get to the final cut I remove that because I just think if you produce these dead points, people will get up and go or they lose the thread you are giving them. So to give you a précis of what I was embarked on, the idea is that with these conceptual pieces I am involved in, you come up with an idea, you get some participants who are going to do something and then you organise it for a day and they act or the happening occurs. You might use voice-over. You might talk to them or use that to give the piece weight. I'm not frightened of using any sort of convention. I will

probably always title my work. It helps you identify which work is which. The idea that you don't title work because it keeps it somehow raw is ridiculous. Far be it from me to run others down, but the idea is to use whatever convention you think works for you. Some of my stuff is a little bit TV. I'm not frightened of using that if it seems to hold it together. I think *Walking Off Court* is a very good work. I don't think any people have picked up on it. It's got very nice and very interesting sets of elements. The answer machine messages that come in are fabulous: the central character who was a tennis coach and has a nervous breakdown. Those messages are real and they are both hilarious and very moving. They are using the sense of someone trying to understand the world, but not by having to visit it all over the place. The idea of trying to understand the world not by actually going and consuming it all, but just staying in one place and walking around in circles, seemed to me a nice metaphor. That film has these interesting camera shots that go around and around in big circles all the time. It's definitely video art but it gets on with it, my stuff.

MW: Did the guy in *Walking Off Court* who you made the work about, did he see the finished piece?

GB: No he didn't. I occasionally felt a bit bad about it because at some bits it is a laugh at his expense. There was a time where it just so happened that he was actually in the local courts a lot and so we had a few games together and of course he was pretty good. But, he had his own troubles and so at first I felt a bit bad about it in some ways. He was used without him knowing. I wouldn't have thought he would like it anyway because when you've got sort of serious troubles it's not something to be made light of.

MW: To go back to the editing, you talked a bit about how you like to make it succinct and know when to stop. Do you do your own editing mostly?

GB: Yes, in the end video art is no different to making a painting. You are never quite sure what you are making and it's a sense of responding to what you've done so far and then perhaps shooting a bit more. Certainly, if I am thinking of *Walking Off Court,* that would be a piece made like that. It's almost like writing a poem or a short story. You keep on trying bits out. It took me a long time before it all clicked into place, but I think that what really makes it look different, is the fact that you get makers who are using the edit suite much more in an explorative and playful way. You make a mark where you use a piece of dialogue and question how it works with this and then you do something else, and nobody else really does that. Television certainly doesn't do that. They get into an edit where they put ideas on paper. In fact I think the expression they say in television is, "Pictures are bollocks." You just get the structure of it right and any idiot can stick the pictures in. Obviously they need to be nicely shot and nicely done, but to a producer it's not a big concern. They know that a good editor can put in the pictures, it's just whether the arguments flow and the talking underneath is doing the business. The great thing about video is it's not like that. Every stage of the production is much more open. You're trying things out and inevitably that produces a completely different feel.

MW: So do you spend quite a long time editing? Does the work change?

GB: I am not somebody who likes it in the way that potters and print-makers seem to just love long hours. I don't approach it like that. All the print-makers and pottery people

I've ever known, they are just doomed to hours pissing about with this stuff. I don't have the patience for that kind of activity. I probably edit it a bit and then wonder off disappointed, before coming back and watching it. Then I am off again. I try and come up with a solution. I am not one of those people who endlessly edits. There's certain character, I remember with the U-matic editing who'd just get very fussy about first generation quality. You'd do your piece and then you'd go back over it dropping in first generation pictures. I never used to bother. Often there didn't seem to be much difference. It certainly didn't seem worse. I am not one of those characters who gets wound-up about taking too long, but I think a lot about it. It can be very pretentious.

MW: Do you work with actors when you need people in your pieces or are they friends?

GB: I have worked with actors. *Taxi Driver II* and *Venetian Ghost* were with actors. But for the majority of works, I have not.

MW: So people in *Shouting Match* for instance are they friends or people you know?

GB: No, I just put up adverts and I got to know various people, people I know who'd be good at something like that. It's very difficult with something like that to know who'd be good at it. It's such an odd thing to ask of people. Also another thing about art I've learnt is that you always have to go that extra mile. The analogy might be you get a camera and you walk down to the high street and then you come home, but the amount of people interested in footage like that is miniscule because it's so every day. If you took a camera on a pole and went to a tiny island in the West Indies and swung the camera around where the sea meets the sand in one continuous arc, already you are more likely to have quite an exciting work, because both as an idea and the amount of work you put in it to get to that island accrue to it a lot more interest. So I think you have to go the distance. You have to go the extra mile in today's context. There has to be something quite exceptional to stand up because we are absolutely inundated with unusual images. I think our advertising still retains quality. I am always amazed. Some of the adverts are just brilliant. In fact, they do a lot of artist work better. The Volkswagen adverts were better than Gillian Wearing's work. Fischer and Weiss have certainly become popular for advertisers and I think it was Volkswagen that copied them. But the adverts are great, so in that sense, you need to come up with something a little bit different for anyone to even look out for it.

MW: How did you construct your recent piece with the car painting?

GB: Left to my own devices I would have just chucked a lot of paint early in the morning on the Finchley Road but we couldn't because of Arts Council funding and the threat of being sued. So, it was actually a gargantuan production. It was Mike Jennings who I have to thank for that, because we found an airfield and we found a scrap guy with some cars that worked. Then we had to find the drivers for them and the whole thing had to be constructed.

MW: And it's an aerial shot?

GB: Yes, there's a big crane and the cars. It was quite stressful because we could only do it once. Once you've thrown all the paint on the road there was no mopping up and starting again.

MW: Was that with Film and Video Umbrella?

GB: Yes, they are very good. What's different about them now is that they are a one-stop-shop. They not only commission work, but then they know where it's going to be exhibited. There was nothing like that years ago, so it's a very sophisticated operation they've got, commissioning the work and then putting it on. I think that car piece is going to about 40 different venues across Britain. Then they've got a press company as well who get whatever they can in papers and things like that. It's a very sophisticated operation. It's nothing like LVA. Everything improves but the difference between Film and Video Umbrella and LVA is a million miles. Film and Video Umbrella have professionalism and a range of expertise. So, that's a good thing. If they are out there working for you, they give you the best kind of treatment. You can just concentrate on an idea and they make sure it gets out there.

MW: So, you have a whole crew that comes with a cameraperson?

GB: Yes, they organised it all. I even ended up putting some of my own money into it actually, which is not what you want in these things, but it cost so much to do that piece. Actually, as it turned out, it's been very good for them. I think it's one of the most popular pieces of that package. They put it in the Tate for a month. I've not had that before, which is good.
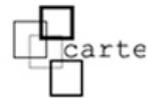
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