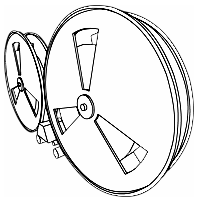

REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s
Interview with Lei Cox

Interview by Professor Stephen Partridge and Emile Shemilt 14th August 2007

ES: Which of the works you have produced do you consider to be important and why?

LC: From the period that we are talking about, I think it would be *The Size of Things*, which was made in 1987. It is a fairly large scale 4-screen installation made using tubes. It could be reconfigured so you could stack it vertically. It is the moist important work because it contains all of my ideas that I still use now. It contains re-occurring elements. The piece is really bout trying to leave the planet and find a new one. Sadly it hasn't been shown as much as it could. It's been shown in Holland and in Germany and in Brussels, but it hasn't really been shown in the UK. Part of me wants to make *The Size of Things 2*, using newer technology and things that I didn't really have access to at the time. I would have been thinking, 'Why can't I do what I want to do?' Now that I can do these things, I wouldn't mind re-visiting it.

ES: So was that shown as stacked monitors?

LC: Well, it ran for about 20 minutes. You add that up as 4 x 20 minutes worth of material, with a lot of animation, it took about a year and a half to make. There were some times when I thought it was going awfully pear-shaped, but then it would click back in again. It was made in a very free-form way. It was authored at the end when it all made sense. It was played in a dark space with monitors on plinths. There is a key point where a man with his hands up in the air, representing a radar scanner, turns into a rocket. All the screens showed different parts of the body. Then I came on, wearing dark clothes, and reassembled myself into the form of a rocket, and then it took off through the top of the screen. It was physically reconfigured, which I quite liked. Luckily the monitors weren't too heavy. But I think, if I had the money and the synchronisation capability, it probably would have stood in a cross formation, where it would been switched.

SP: So are you saying there was a performance element?

LC: Well you wouldn't really call it that. It was important that I walked on and that it was me and I was reassembling myself into this rocket. When it shot out of the screen, a whole load of tin cans fell through the screens and filled up the whole stack, leaving a glass case or glass coffin of empty tin cans. So yes, there was a performance element because it was important that I was in it.

SP: What about works that were shown in the UK?

LC: An important work is *Lighthead*, which is a derivative from *The Size of Things*. *Lighthead* is a fictional character. He a human body with a light bulb superimposed on his head. The

light bulb represents a vacuous space, almost a man with no idea. It also represents a sperm-type character. That was shown in the quite extensively UK, and an image was on the front cover of Performance Magazine, although it was a derivative. *Lighthead* is based around the Greek Myth of Icarus flying too close to the sun. In this case, *Lighthead* was born out of a blip, a bit like a heart-rate monitor blip. Eventually, it reveals itself as a little winged creature. Then it has a dual with a little aeroplane, a bit like the Wright Brothers' first aeroplane. They fly backwards and forwards and dodge each other until the little character scrapes his head on the inside of the screen, which is also the tube and the vacuum. Then it implodes and dies.

ES: There seem to be narratives to your work. Would you agree with that?

LC: Yes, there are narratives that come from a big pool. I think I've created this little world with things in it. There is a lot of cross-references on influences and they grow as I grow. It's in a constant state of change. It is a fairly nebula form, all these things are quite tangential. They all lock up every now and then, or they change in some way. They transform into something. *Lighthead* was actually re-incarnated for another piece about ten years later. I'm thinking about using it again as well. In a way, it becomes part of a language or a set of raw materials, as well as re-occurring themes.

ES: Have you used compositing in these works?

LC: No, it wasn't compositing. We didn't have that sort of kit. At that time, I was using a Fairlight 8-bit real-time machine. It was pretty cool. You could do a lot of good things with it in nightclubs. For me though, it was a bit blocky and pixel-ey. I used luma-key techniques, where the body was shot and then the head replaced with the lightbulb, which was keyed on top of the head. To create the movement I just animated the figure flapping. I then took the monitor and a camera into a dark studio. I made everything completely dark. Then I tilted and panned the camera to create the movement. It was quite funny at the time because I got a review from Nik Houghton, from Independent Media. He thought I was a Chinese woman because of the way I spell my name. He had me down as a Chinese woman animator. It was funny because I met him in Camden Theatre when he invited me to be on a panel. He was pretty shocked when he found out that I wasn't a Chinese woman animator.

SP: What influenced this sort of work?

LC: I've got loads of influences I guess. It's a bit crass to say it, but I've always been a fan of Dali and Picasso, the A-level gods. I'm a fan of Ernst. At the time I was reading a lot about Atom Bombs. It was the end stage of the cold war, but it was still a problem. People were still worried about things. I think in a way, I'm influenced by science fiction, mythology and surrealism. I don't like reality very much. Even living in reality, is not as fun as being asleep and dreaming.

ES: So you see the video space as an 'other' space?

LC: Yes, I think so. It allows me to work in a very fictional capacity. But I think in a way, a lot of my work could be seen as moving or animated photo-montage at the time. I didn't really use any camera movements, other than creating motion within something that then appeared to be flying across the screen. Maybe today you can animate that with a computer. I was aware, after a while, that everything was locked-off. I didn't move camera. Even today, that is the case. From time to time I work commercially as a cameraperson and I enjoy the freedom to move the camera and do something different with it. It keeps me a bit sharper. At least I know how to do that should I need to. Video becomes this sort of canvas that is black. I've been thinking about this as well because a lot of my work involves magic or some sort of illusion. One of the last pieces I made in 2004, *Teleportation Experiment* uses this technique of locked-off cameras, dark spaces and magic, not dissimilar to a magician using a dark stage. I've come to realise I do that as well. Recently, my son went to a clown show at a circus. He bought a plastic plate to spin. I'm thinking at the moment, of making a simple video of trying to spin the plastic plate until I spin it. Then I would allow the plate to go and do something that completely defies gravity. So it would look like a very simple one-shot work. I would run the camera for as long as it takes me to learn to spin the plate. Then the plate will hover around for a while, then zip off. Magic, it's important.

ES: It is interesting because a lot of early video use was used as a documentation medium, while a lot of early video art was a self-referential exposé of the medium's capabilities. It seemed to have that element of being 'in' or 'of' reality, where as one might say that your use is knowingly fantastical. It might sound clichéd to say it, but I suppose you could say that the locked-off shot in your work might represent some kind of window into this fantastical space?

LC: I think of it as a space to do something in. Quite often it would be dark, although that has changed recently with super-imposed backgrounds. I use myself quite a lot in my work. I always have. Partly, I think it is because the stuff took so long to set up and I couldn't find anybody willing to sit with it, or pose long enough. In a way, I guess that is why it is a locked-off camera as well. I thought about making a piece using the out-takes, where I actually turn the camera on, get in front of my stage or my black space or my magic space, and use the out-takes. Some of them are hilarious.

ES: Would that make it a more obvious deconstruction of the illusion?

LC: Yes, I suppose it would. Now I have more money so it is possible that I can go and film things in location. In my latest work, I'm flying out to America to shoot three pieces. In the past, I would go out, record the backgrounds separately and chroma-key them in. Now I've got the money to go out, sit and wait for the right light and do it for real.

ES: One of the interesting things I have found about your work is that it often seems to have an 'other worldly' background, partly because of the composited background. The video colours as well, seem to have their own aesthetic. If you were to record it now, is there a conflict where people might recognise the location?

LC: I don't know because, if you are shooting things in reality, you get all the strange things occurring like wind and all sorts of little bits of debris floating across the frame, or just movement. It's easier to worry about where the shadows are because you are using the sun and you've got one shadow. In the past when I've been trying to make illusions work on screen, I have had to think very carefully about light – what it is, were it comes from and how to control it. If I'm trying to match up a key studio shot with a background, I have to really think about where the light is falling. I used to make a little diagram in a book, pointing out where the camera is in relation to the direction of the sunlight. I would note for example, "the sunlight is at a 45 degree angle, it is 10:30 in the morning and it is slightly blue. The light is more blue than in the afternoon." Nowadays, it's much easier because you can just throw all that information into your computer, and it will give you the exact position of Mars 1000 years ago.

ES: You use projection now.

LC: Yes, projections have always been important. I've always wanted to use space. With *The Size of Things*, using more screens gave me the ability to move things across a space and across a room. Now, you can fill a room with a projector beam and think in a different way. I'm quite excited about High Definition possibilities now because in the past, I would maybe have had to use two or three screens and lock them like a giant fresco, just to keep up a believable resolution. Now, I can do it all on one screen. I can shoot it in wide-screen, project it big on a high definition projector and make a very elaborate mask so I don't have to think about synchronisation. That technology has changed the way I think. But, projection has always been important because I'm trying to create a life-size window in a gallery. Size has always been important. With simple work, it has always been important that the human being that is in the piece is life-size. I've always been inspired and amazed by walking into a space like a Malcolm Pointer and realising that all these sculptures are life-size. They are life-casts. A strange presence is there, especially if you go into a space on your own and you are faced with a life-size form, you bring it to life yourself. It adds to the illusion I guess. It's the same with volumes. If they are coming from a person, they should be emitted at life-size amplitude, so again, this reality is confirmed.

ES: Would you consider using monitors again?

LC: Probably not, no. If I'm making something for TV, then yes, I would think about the monitor space. But, everyone has different sized monitors and my work is bout scale. If I made small works, then they would probably fit on monitors. I'm still attracted to the light that is emitted from a monitor. That has always been very different from a projection. The light is somehow more natural because it is coming from behind you and it is reflected off a wall, whereas with a monitor, it is emitted, so it is fired at you. Liquid Crystal is interesting now,. If I could have a big liquid crystal display, or liquid crystal that I could paint onto a wall, I would rather use that then a projection, because of the emission. It's very special. It's like looking out of window, rather that looking at a reflected surface, or looking through the window.

ES: So you've never seen the monitor as an object?

LC: I guess I've used it as an object. *Lighthead*, the single screen version, needed it because it needed the ghosting effect that was achieved from the cathode ray tube. In the making of the piece, because it was assembled from static, animated and then re-shot from the monitor, with the camera moving, it was important to get this ghosting effect from an old, three-tube vidicon camera. That created the ghost-like effect. When it was played back, it worked better on a monitor because phosphorus in the tubes, make it ghost a little bit more. If you play that on an LCD monitor, it doesn't do it as well. It's the same with a projector. So, yes, monitors still have their place. But, at the moment, my work has gone really big. The projected screens are now 7 metres or 10 metres or 20 metres. It's scale that I'm interested in. My works are like frescos filling walls. Maybe, I'm like a painter making big paintings.

ES: It is interesting that you are referring to it as quite a painterly medium, using terms like frescos, because you have also referred to the way you think about video as a moving photograph.

LC: I think the association in the early years with monitors in galleries was that video art was like TV. I think a lot of the general public who would come in, or people who weren't necessarily educated in video art, still saw it as TV and wanted it as entertainment. They were disappointed when somebody had something minimally moving on the screen for an hour. Then people tried to put them behind walls and turn them into canvases. I don't think that ever worked very well. Maybe Marty St James pulled it off with his portrait series, but that needed a big chunky gold frame to make it work, so that you might accept it for what it was.

ES: The body is a recurring theme in your work. Is it you? Is it Lei Cox? Or, is it a body?

LC: That is an interesting question. Yes and no, is the answer. After a while, I got fed up with it and decided to kill off Lei Cox The Performance To Camera Artist, in the desert in Utah, on the Bonneville Flats. Again, it was a composited structure. I went out there to photograph it and then stuck it in the background using blue-screen. I'm about to fly out there next year and I might re-make it again for real. It is a piece called *In Conversation With Myself as a V-Actor*, where 'v' stands for virtual. I guess I think about it in those terms. It is me, but I often refer to it as him. It's just a bloke on screen, playing with something. Sometimes it's dangerous. Sometimes it's not. It's interesting when I got into replication. There is a work I made in 1988 called *The Parallel*, which I think is probably one of the best works I have made. It's been quite successful, it has been shown on a lot of TV channels, canal plus, Japanese TV and more recently on a programme on Channel 4. The programme was about surrealism. It was about art for kids and the various movements in art. I was wedged between Dali and Max Ernst, which was great, because it was exactly where I thought I should be. It confirmed me as a surrealist. I've always had this thing that you can't call yourself an artist, someone else has to call you an artist. You can't really say, 'I'm a surrealist', until someone else says you are. That was important. *Parallel* is a very simple piece. It was shot in a day. It was edited in a day using one very simple DV effect in an edit-suite, and it was post-dubbed it two days. It was made for about £15 and it must have grossed me about £5000 so far. People still want to rent it. It was just rented

by a Psychological Society in Norway, for some bizarre reason they saw it. It is a very simple piece about understanding that there may be a parallel universe. I think there is. Somewhere, in another universe, there is another Lei Cox being interviewed. There may be many of those. So the piece is all about that. It wasn't 'me' that was in it. It still worked. The subject is a man walking around with a reflection of himself, almost walking across the top of a pond. But, it wasn't quite a reflection. After a while, the reflection slips synch and you realise that they are two different beings, possibly in a parallel universe.

ES: Those ideas of possibilities are consistent in your work like *The Sufferance* and in *Flower Fields* where you have changed your body into something else.

LC: I think it comes from the idea of being super-human or having the possibility to do that. As soon as you see something like an old-fashioned Quantel Paint Box work, you're suddenly aware that you can stick your arm through your nostril or have three ears. You can be really cheesy with it. I dream a lot. I have very strange dreams all the time. None of these are chemically induced. It has always happened. I read a lot of Kafka and I guess it started influencing my dreams and I did turn into an insect. Then I saw some insects flying around and struggling against the wind. I think there were dragonflies. These dragonflies were in a dogfight. You go home, eat a lot of cheese, induce a good dream, and you find yourself dreaming about turning into an insect flying around. I guess it is just an extension of a metaphor. It means that you can do it and make it kind of believable, or make it kind of quirky. It is important that my work works for a magnitude of ages. It is not really for highbrow art types. It is not even for collectors really. It is for everybody. I'm quite inspired when a five-year old will have a good time in a gallery with it or when an eighty-year old will have a smile and a giggle. It's kind of kitsch and it's kind of fun. I suppose that's what is dreamlike.

ES: It is like you are playing with the limitless idea of what the body can do in this space. When you have *Lighthead* banging his head of the edge of the screen, it is as though you are reminded of the limitations that that figure has.

LC: It's that classic Icarus deal: realising that you could have had something special and then maybe going for it too hard and wrecking it. I don't get bored easily. I haven't been bored for a very long time. I can be fascinated by the simplest of things. I can sit in a place, in the sun, watch ants and think about what they are doing. If it sparks an idea off, I'll use it in a piece of work. Those steps are quite important in my work as well.

ES: Lets talk about how you started working with video. Did you start with photography?

LC: Yes, I used photography when I was a student at Sheffield art school. Actually, before I got there, I was interested in ceramics and casting. I was interested in bronze-casting in particular. I saw it as almost three-dimensional photography. If you look at a lot of Picasso's early work, it pretty much is. It is a series of found objects that are positioned together and then casts and multiples are made. When you look at it, it is just a Three-dimensional photograph of the original object. I started photographing a lot as well and then gradually moved into video. Moving into video was also primed by my interest in sound and music as well. Video became a way of using still images, using motion, using

sound, using music, so in a way, it felt like a multi-media tool. That's why I used it. I didn't really question it at the time, but there was this strange black space that I was inspired by. It was a performance space as well as a blank canvas. So I didn't really see it as video.

ES: Do you remember the first time you used video?

LC: I got hold of a video camera that I borrowed from my foundation art course. I used it on the back of 150cc Lambretta Scooter, recording traffic. That was just experimenting. I first used it my work badly. I made a lot of terrible video pieces. The first time I really used it properly was in a piece called *The Breakfast Trilogy*, which I'm still quite proud of. It's made up of three video works. One was called *57 Varieties,* which was about trying to open a baked bean can without a can-opener but using various power-tools. It got more and more ridiculous as it progressed. Eventually it involved big electric drills coming in and a welding kit and an angle-grinder. At one point the baked bean can span around and it resembled the earth. There was a clean shot of the baked bean can falling through the frame, which was then opened by a can-opener and the beans were fed to a baby.

ES: How aware were you of other artists working with video?

LC: I read Independent Media a lot as well as After Image and anything from America. I was looking at a lot of Americans, including a young Gary Hill. Then I saw some stuff in the Mappin Art Gallery in Sheffield, so I went to London and saw as much as I could.

ES: Were many of your fellow students using video?

LC: Yes, there were. At the time, there was a bit of a vibe in Sheffield. There was a lot of Scratch Video being made. People like Sven Harding, Pam Smith and Mike McDowell were making a lot of really crazy stuff. We had some nice equipment and it was possible to work at a very good level. In those days, it was almost broadcast quality. It was always very well managed and there was a good vibe. There was a lot of work being shown by students. There was a big media art show every year, which we would invite people from around the country to show work in. So yes, a lot was being made and a lot was being watched.

ES: Were you interested in Scratch Video?

LC: No, not really. I never liked the idea of using other people's material or other people's music. It's always been a very important thing for me to make everything from scratch. The only thing I've ever used from somewhere else is a shot of an Apollo rocket taking off. It was shot super-close up and shot from a screen, in a way to say, "Yes, this isn't mine. It is something else." It was also to state that it was being watched on a screen. One of my first memories of TV, was of a rocket taking off. I was laying down, with my feet on a radiator watching this other rocket taking off, almost upside down. Then I remember a milk commercial coming on straight afterwards. It was of a milk bottle and it looked like a little bit like a rocket on a podium ready for blast off. I didn't like the Scratch Video stuff because using other people's material didn't interest me at all.

ES: So you weren't interested in video's connections with television?

LC: Well, I guess *57 Varieties* was a bit of a comment on advertising, but it wasn't necessarily televisual advertising. It could be a billboard or it could be a photograph in a magazine. I haven't really thought so much about television apart from when I worked for television and was commissioned by a television network to make a piece for Glasgow City of Culture in 1990, for *Not Necessarily* on BBC 2. The piece was called *Three Unanswered Questions*. Again, it was about a performer in a dark space, but answering very quick questions like, 'What came first, the chicken or the egg?' or 'What goes up, should come down'. So it was about gravity as well. The final part of the piece is called *What's in The Box?* which is a direct reference to television. The actor was standing in front of the screen and a can of baked beans falls from the sky and lands in his hands. He starts to eat them, but he is aware that he is being watched by a Televisual audience. So he addresses the back of the screen. Eventually he destroys the TV set. There is a point where he reaches behind, grabs the back of the TV and throws it over his shoulder. Various special effects were deployed like sparklers as he was pulling out the circuit board. The TV sequence starts to degenerate with lots of white noise. Eventually he head butts the screen, it fills with baked beans and it ends. It was a piece using TV, but addressed directly at the audience. It was saying, 'This isn't TV, but it is.'

ES: So the spectator is important in your work.

LC: For that piece the spectator is important. The spectator is also important for the work that I'm best known for, *Flower Field*. That was an attempt to create an immersive environment, which was a physical one. You actually walk into an installation and play with these interactive talking flowers and are part of that world.

ES: There is something interesting in comparing *Three Unanswered Questions*, where it plays with the deconstruction of the illusion, which is what a lot of the early video works were also about, with *Flower Field*, where you're creating a space, which the viewer is trying to part of, but is aware that they can't be. I would say that it might have something to do with the ephemeral nature of the media and an attempt to make it physical.

SP: I think, *Three Unanswered Questions* deals with the medium directly. It is doing puns upon it. It is self-referential. Where *Flower Field*, is from a different era, with different concerns.

LC: Yes, Flower Field is really sculptural. It uses a sculptural space. It didn't matter if it was video or not, it was just important to get these life size flying things in the background, fighting with each other. It is not supposed to have any reference to TV or anything like that. It is a sculptural installation. It lives in that world. It is an environment.

SP: We've talked about Sheffield, but then you came to Dundee. Was there another set of concerns and/or people that were important, influential or involved?

LC: Yes, coming to Dundee was very weird. People would say to me, "Why are you going there? It's just a small river town. Nothing ever happens there." And I would say, "Maybe, but they seem to have a lot of kit." I wanted to learn new techniques. I could see where

the work was going and I could look over my shoulder and see what Sven Harding and Pam Smith and people were doing with their scratch video. I liked some of it. It seemed to have this clean edge, this very commercial edge to it. I knew that there was a lot of interesting things going on in Dundee. Both you Steve, and Colin McCloud were influential in making one think that you could work commercially and that I should be maybe trying to push work in a slightly different direction. But, I think the art content changed quite considerably because I had quite a lot of access to Quantel Paintbox. At the time, that started to enable me to realise greater surrealist tendencies in the way that I could fuse things. I could fuse my own body with that of an insect's. I could put a rabbit's head on my body and crawl around a bit with some fancy chroma keying and handmade animation. That was important and I think it was also important to be in a place where artists would be mixing with designers and wannabe TV students. It opened a lot of interesting debates and created various sorts of teamwork. It was important for me at that time to start working with other people and learn from them as well as my tutors and whatever else was going on around me.

ES: Were there any other people or communities that you were involved with?

LC: Pre-1990, there was Eddie Berg. I met Eddie Berg in 1989. I think he's always been a bit of a fan of my work and I've managed to get a few commissions through him over the years, including Video Positive. It was important to meet him and realise that there were people like him out there and who had a lot of very genuine energy to push this work. At the time it was important that people spent time and energy into getting enough money together from various councils or art councils to create some very big shows. Strangely, I'm restaging a version of a work in FACT to celebrate the archival interest in the Video Positive works and to bring it back to life again. So Eddie Berg was really important at that time. After that period, curators like Melentie Pandilovski Jasia Reichardt and Tomoe Moriyama in Tokyo, have all been really important and are continuing to be.

SP: You also had some interesting contemporaries in Dundee.

LC: Yes, Clio Barnard was very interesting, but doing very, very different stuff. It was just nice to be able to go and talk to her in a bar about how she works. There were a variety of people because also, there was also Louise Wilson of the Wilson twins, Jane and Louise Wilson. There were some other people who were photographers and painters, Richard Paul, and John Cousins. In a way, it made me think a bit harder about what I was doing because everybody was working in such a different way. When I was an undergraduate in Sheffield people were hitting a certain formula, but in Dundee working in different ways was always encouraged.

ES: Can you talk about when and how you exhibited your work at that time?

LC: *The Breakfast Trilogy,* and *57 Varieties* was picked up by Terri Frecker and Clive Gilman at the New Contemporaries on The Mall in London. That was important because I was still a student and I managed to get a piece in a show with Damian Hirst and Gillian Wearing when they were all really young kids as well. It was quite nice to go down because I didn't

realise that it really was quite a big deal. I thought, "this is quite nice, I could do a bit more of this." So that's when I started exhibiting.

SP: What year was that?

LC: That was 1986. People were interested in showing my work when I was a student. Various people would come to Sheffield and want to take the work and show it somewhere. At the time *Lighthead* was very weird. Nobody knew how I did it. It had a 'wow' factor, which helped things. It was often squeezed into festivals around the world where there was a weird screening list or running order. Then the work I made when I was a post-graduate student in Dundee had a very slick professional edge, which helped as well. It used a lot of Paintbox time and nobody could afford to use that much Paintbox time as an artist, so I was very lucky. That was picked up by various people as well. I sent the work to London Video Arts and they started distributing it very early on. Then I left Dundee momentarily, before I came back and taught there, and went to Amsterdam for a while. I did a show in Arnhem in what was basically a very big student-run video festival called AVE '88. When I was there I went to René Coelho's Monte Video when it was on the Singel Canal. I went there with all these tapes that I had been showing at the festival in Arnem. I couldn't be bothered carrying them because they were really big, so I thought I might see if I could loosen them creatively. I'd also met David Garcia, who has also been quite an important supporter of my work. He suggested that I should try and get them shown and that I should try Monte Video. At the time his organisation Time Based Art was struggling and he didn't know so much about the future. Eventually Monte Video and Time Based Art merged. So, I took my tapes along and knocked on René Coelho's door. René basically had a gallery in his house on the Singel Canal. It was a beautiful house and it had a nice gallery space. He seemed a bit alarmed that I was trying to offload these tapes. He said, "No, we don't want them." I said, "Have them. If you don't like the work, you can just have the tapes themselves. Give them to somebody who is editing," because tapes were quite expensive at the time, "or just throw them away". He smiled and three weeks later David Garcia called me and said, "René really likes the work and wants to meet you." So I went over to Amsterdam to meet René again and he gave me my first show, showing the piece *The Untitled, The Observed*, which was a three-channel installation, made in Dundee while I was a student. Part of it was made afterwards. That was in 1990. It was my first important solo-show even though it was a small gallery. Again, things just rolled on. People would go in there, see the work and want to hire it for their festivals. It just took off from there. So, I've never really actively promoted my work other than send a few tapes off from time to time. One show has always followed another. That is probably why I'm still teaching. If I had actively pursued trying to harangue people, I might be making a full-time living out of it.

ES: So you're work was distributed through LVA.

LC: Yes, it was distributed through LVA, Monte Video and 235 Media in Cologne. The work is still there and they still send me royalty checks from time to time. I haven't updated them and sent them my other stuff because it's all installation. All the early stuff pre-1990 was single screen or tube-installation. After that, when projectors started to excite me, things were always too big to be distributed. It was gallery art. It wasn't video art.

ES: So you feel that there is a distinct difference for your work?

LC: Yes, I think so. I prefer to show in galleries, rather than on TV or in screenings.

ES: What were your experiences of LVA?

LC: To start with, LVA was great because I started building a very big C.V. and I was getting quite a lot of royalties. I had a bit of a golden year from about 1989 to 1990 when a lot of my work was being shown and I got a lot of commissions. I was incredibly busy. Then it started falling apart when various key people left. I guess they didn't really get the funding and things started getting dusty on shelves, or you would find out that your work had been shown and you hadn't been paid. It all got a bit sloppy. I was having more success with 235 Media and Monte Video. Strangely, there weren't that many festivals around the world. There were some important ones. Occasionally, one festival would want to hire your work and it was difficult to work out who should be showing it. Each distributor had rights in their own country and non-exclusive exclusive worldwide. So, if you had a person in Austria trying to hire a piece, three organisations could be punting the same piece, and you would cause a minor war in the video distribution world, which isn't a good idea.

SP: Can you talk about Jasia Reichardt?

LC: Jasia is quite interesting. With *Flowerfield*, which is probably my most successful piece, when it was premiered in Liverpool at the Tate Gallery it caused a lot of interest. A lot of people wanted to hire it, but couldn't afford to put it on. It is a very expensive work and a very difficult work to install. It used a lot of temperamental technology and very specific technology. The National Portrait Gallery saw the work and wanted to commission me to make a work for their gallery. So they flew me down, we had various discussions and I had lots of ideas. I suddenly realised though, that I had to work with a famous, British person, because it was the National Portrait Gallery. So, I wrote a piece for Vivian Westwood and I wanted to make an Exquisite Corpse with her. The idea was for a three-screen piece. You could swap her head into the middle or a leg. She'd be wearing different clothes or her models would be wearing different clothes and you could create a new Exquisite Corpse Westwood. Then you would put a pound in, press print and you would get a postcard printed out, which would actually help fund the piece. So, the National Portrait Gallery were interested. They were working with a curator who was Jasia Reichardt. She was very key. She wrote *Cybernetics Serendipity* in the 60s, and worked with a lot of people all over the planet. They invited her to curate a show of electronic portraiture, or what she considered to be electronic portraiture. So I flew down and met her. She wanted to show *Flowerfield*, which she did, in Japan. Originally, the tour was going to go to the Pompidou, MOMA and Japan. But at that time, the Yen fell through the floor. It was 1998 and there was a big financial crash. The money just disappeared, so the only place they could afford to take it to was Tokyo. The National Portrait Gallery couldn't even afford to put it in its own gallery. The show was pretty big. I think it cost over half a million pounds to put it on. There were 13 artists. So, that was where I fist met Jasia. She was quite intrigued by the work and came to a show I did in Newcastle, at the Globe Gallery, which was a solo show with a new commission. She saw the work and

loved it. But, the funny thing is, when she walked into the space, she was slightly arrogant and started to say things like, "I don't like that. That's a René Magritte." or "I like that, but can you have more of these?" I just looked at her and thought, "Jasia, why don't you make the work yourself?" Luckily she had a laugh about that, she decided what she wanted to show and we agreed. She's been promoting my work ever since. She'll show it a lecture series around the world, or recommend it to other people, for example I had a show in Tel Aviv in 2004, which came about from a direct recommendation from Jasia. That was fun, because when I looked at the catalogue, I realised that half the people in the show were dead and the other half were Turner Prize nominees, so I was the only person in there that was still teaching and making money from teaching. It was nice because I was showing with Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Sometimes I make the work and I don't even realise that I'm making art. I just do it. I think this I've not promoted it as much as I could have. Every now and then, I'm reminded again, usually on a world platform, that it is quite good. It can hold its own. I think that's great, but that sort of success never really influences me into working in a particular way, even though I'm thinking about making multiples for sale and have just made a whole series.

ES: Have you noticed a difference in the institutions attitudes towards video art?

LC: Yes, definitely. A good friend of mine said that video art is just a blip in the history of art. At that time there were people making things outside of the mainstream that were quite experimental. It was addictive and seductive. We were able to make things that looked like TV but weren't. We could match the quality with a bit of time. You didn't need a big crew and so on. To some extent it was difficult. It was difficult to learn how to do things, like how to get good at lighting or how to get good with sound or how to be a good editor. It was also difficult to know how to repeat the last successful work. It was also expensive. Then I think suddenly, maybe in the early 90s, around 1992 or 1993, video cameras were suddenly cheap and accessible. They were also very forgiving. You would just switch them on and everything looked ok. They would 'auto' everything for you. You didn't have to line up the tubes. You didn't have to make manual white balances. The auto-white balance was good enough. More importantly they were portable and they had good batteries. They were super-portable, because they were tiny little cameras. I think then, a lot of big artists like Gillian Wearing and co started to use the cameras as a device for recording their performances. So there was a lot of performance to camera at that time and I think the YBA used these cameras as extensions to their practice. So a lot of people who were working in photography, sculpture or painting were also using video as part of their entire practice. Because of the excitement that the YBA generated at the time around the world art market, people started to look at it again. I would contribute some of that to the way video art has changed. I don't think it is a blip. I think a lot of people are now excited by the potential of video. They are looking at what happened pre-Gillian Wearing. They are starting to se how interesting it is. Just looking at certain big shows by Nam June Paik, helps you realise how long artists like Nam June Paik have been working with video. It's a colossal amount of time. Some things that were made then, you can't replicate now. They just don't look the same and they never will. I think there is a wider appreciation that exists and a general inquisitive nature in people to find out what went on before, so people are archiving and using those archives. That's become very important.

ES: Do you think projection has changed video?

LC: Yes, when affordable projection became available, I think it changed the way people thought about video art. Suddenly it became closer to film, or it would be a window on something, like a moving painting. So in a way, you could say it broadened what video art was. I think video art suffers from its label. It's called 'video art'. You don't call a painting, 'painted art'. You don't refer to 'drawn art' or 'concrete art' or 'neon art'. It's always suffered from that name, which was just an easy way to classify things. I guess it was fine because video was still exciting then. Not many people had a video camera at home, they were still using 8mm film. I think as soon as video projection was available it made people think in a different way. They had to think about scale and they had to think about set design in a better way. I think that has happened again now with High Definition. High Definition has changed the way think again. It is possible to go much bigger and into much better detail. You have to think like a filmmaker. You have to think about how lens sizing might work and how set design is more important because there is more detail. You can't get away with murder any more. You can't just paint something, sit it back and put a hot light on it. You have to really think about using the real thing or concentrating more on the detail. Then you can't help thinking about your work in a cinematic way because of the scale that you can go to. So you are influenced by movies and the physical properties of the cinema. With standard video projection and doing screenings etc, you wee always praying that nobody made the projector go too big. You'd hope it was a good optimum size to make it look real.

ES: It is interesting because one might say that artists don't necessarily classify themselves as video artists or sculptors or painters, they are just artists. But, maybe now with High Definition, a certain amount training may be required to attain a skill as a High Definition Video Artist.

LC: I'm not so sure that training is important. I was in Tokyo 8 weeks ago, and you can pick up a high Definition camera for about £500, or less. They are relatively good. The images are great. So maybe you don't need so much training, but you've got to think a little bit harder about what you're pointing your camera at because although the camera maybe forgiving, it's not masking anything, in a low resolution way. It's showing you warts and all.

ES: So maybe it is a skill that needs to be developed?

LC: I think the skill with any good art is making sure that you're exposure looks good, the lens is not intrusive and if you're trying to demonstrate a performative piece to camera that nothing really gets in the way. If you're trying to emulate cinema, you've got to think in cinematic terms, with lens size and picture cuts. It's worth reading good cinematic books or good lighting books. It depends how you use it as a material. May be you have to take a little more care with what you're pointing the camera at. You can't hide things. With videotape, or VHS tape, you could shoot out the window at rain, and you wouldn't see the rain. It could look great.

SP: Has funding stifled or enabled you?

LC: To some extent. I think my best works, or my most successful works, are *The Parallel* and *Lei Can Fly*. They've been shown on TV a lot, and they were both made for about £15 plus the videotape, which was usually quite expensive because I used quite a lot of it for my composited layers. They were the cheapest works and they were the most fun to make. There wasn't any pressure. They came entirely from my imagination without trying to force it to any grief. Even getting a commission to do whatever you want for a large festival can feel like a big brief. Or, if you've written an application and in order to try to make the artwork sound more exciting, usually you've bitten off more than you can chew, and you've had to deal with it. There is always a compromise. But, suddenly making your own work, self-funded, just with a few quid, means that you don't compromise in any way, unless you need certain things that are expensive. You can work in a free-form way, just like a painter walking up to a blank canvas, taking paint out a tube. You don't have to stick to a plan that you've already been approved and contracted for. So, I think funding is not necessarily a problem. It's the contracting. It's the selection of the idea and the contract saying, "you will now do this piece and we will provide this and that." You're locked in. But, in saying that, my policy towards funding was always to always tax myself. So, a little piece of the budget might buy a little piece of equipment or a big piece of equipment that would then be re-used for other pieces and other purposes. To some extent funding enabled me to build a fairly large sound studio and midi studio and some nice computers. It was possible to then use the funding acquired from a funded commissioned piece to attain this spontaneity. So, in my work some of it has been funded heavily and others have been made for free. I'm working on a very large-scale video piece called *The Darkroom* with Mel Woods. It is like a walk-in Camera Obscura. It works like a traditional Camera Obscura, but then it takes you to a High Definition other place, outside of what is visible. So, there is a strange interplay between what is this old technology and old object and a very new technology. There is also this sense of being able to project yourself somewhere else at a different time. That costs a lot of money, so there are a lot of restrictions or compromises having to be made. But, I still make my own work. I made a piece called *The Teleportation Experiment*, which has been shown in Australia and Tel Aviv and various places around the UK. Again, that was made for next to nothing. It is important to work between both funded and non-funded.

SP: Has your work attracted critical or theoretical writing?

LC: There have been a few books, but they are catalogues really. I think the work has been contextualised against other artists, and the differences have been highlighted in a way that maybe it is fun and it is surreal. It is possibly more entertaining than trying to hammer home a specific point. In context of other works or in catalogues, yes it has received critical and theoretical feedback, but it hasn't been written down extensively.

SP: Do you read contextual or critical writing?

LC: I try not to read so much. I'm not so bothered about what is going on around me. May be I should. I have to if I'm teaching. I have to work out what where references come from or who people should read. That stands from Berger's *Ways of Seeing* to anything Jasia Reichardt has written recently about new electronic art. As an academic you have to encourage people to read critical and contextual texts but it is something that I have

avoided. I'm not so bothered. That is probably a bold thing to say but it doesn't really concern me what people are making at the moment. I don't really try and fit in and I never have. It is also interesting to be aware that technology has had an impact as well. I remember making a piece about cloning and self-replication and it pretty much tainted the whole show. The whole show was about that. At the time, I think the *Star Wars* film *Attack of The Clones* came out and *The Matrix* came out. A lot of people said, "Lei Cox has ripped this off." It just wasn't the case at all. The work pre-dated it by a few months. It is interesting how that happens. I'm not to sure if that is my quest of working with new technology and new compositing techniques and suddenly realising the variety of things you can do, which I then think, "Great, I'll make a piece about that." So, I don't know that technology does actually have an influence on my work, but if it has an influence on Hollywood special effects people as well, which it probably does, then maybe it was inevitable.

ES: I guess it goes back to this idea of the potential limitlessness of the imagery.

LC: Yes, and if you go back and look at some of the work by Dali, he was well ahead of his time. It is a similar thing, Dali did it with paint and photographs and I do it with live action and performance in front of a camera. Hollywood does other things as well, and I guess we share the same territory, so I think it is important to read about things that are happening in, and seeing, films. I see things more than I read. I'm interested in documentaries and artists' biographies. I'm more interested in what artists have to say, not necessarily what theorists have to say. I have a little bone of contention at the moment. Where I am working right now, in Bergen, at Bergen National Academy, there is quite a high emphasis on philosophy and art and philosophy. A lot of it seems to me to be pulled out of context and regurgitated or redeployed in a contemporary setting without actually understanding what was going on at the time. If you want to quote a French philosopher from 200 years ago, you've really got to understand what was happening in France at the time. It is the same with a great composer. I have a PhD Fellow in Norway, who I talk to from time to time, who is basically trying to play a very difficult piece of music that was made 250 years ago by an obscure Italian composer. My point is why are you trying to recreate that without understanding what it was like then? You must go to Italy now. You must find the recital hall. You must find the concert hall. You must emulate the same violin. You must try it out on the street. You should go and busk with it. So, I think a lot of philosophers are quoted by critics and historians completely out of context. They are thrown into new fledgling forms of art, probably inappropriately. So, I have seen some classic misunderstandings by naive uses of philosophical understandings. There are great writers, Jasia Reichardt being one of them, and people like Sean Cubitt. I agree with what he has to say about things. But, generally it doesn't bother me, I might as well just carry on making my work.

ES: So you are not interested in other things like psychoanalytic film theory either?

LC: No, I'm not interested in analysing it so deeply. I respect people for doing it. It is really important and the best people who can pull it off have really understood their area for a long, long time. They make parallels outside of their areas. They will talk about

Hollywood. They will talk about music. They will talk about literature. We are influenced by lots of things, not just what we see in galleries.

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