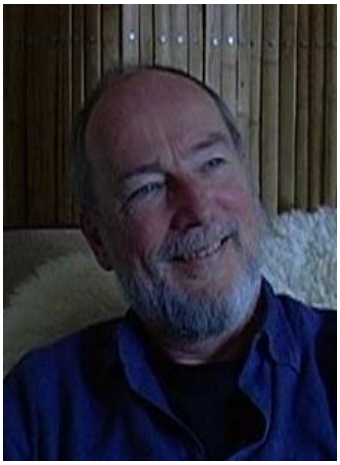
REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70's & 80's
Interview with Mike Leggett

Interview by Dr Jackie Hatfield, Friday 15th April 2005



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

ML: If I was to talk about it as a cross disciplinary practice from which various things emerged, I think maybe earlier on in the seventies my work was very much centred around film, because that was the area in which I had been initially trained at the Polytechnic on Regent Street. That was a combined photography and film course which I completed in1966. That was before the days of video. I continued working with film in the industry for sometime after that and in fact only encountered video tape for the first time when I worked at the BBC in London with the big two inch AMPEX machines which used mechanical editing. That was the late sixties. It was a kind of area of technology, which to me was just 'over there.' 'An industrial thing that I'm never going to be able to touch.' So it was with some surprise that, having moved down to Devon and started teaching at the art college there, we moved into a new building with a lot of capital money to spend and by that time I was aware of the small scale video stuff. Actually, come to think of it now, that was something that I encountered for the first time at Robert Street Arts Lab. Hoppy (John Hopkins) had set up a unit there. The Co-op was there, the gallery was there and there was a sound outfit there. I did some work with John Lifton on one of the films made during that time. So moving down to Devon, suddenly it became possible to buy some of this video gear for the college to work with. It was about 1972

JH: So it was a fairly rapid shift in technologies.

ML: That's right, yes. Certainly in terms of video tape. Obviously, I had done some work with close circuit TV with Ian Breakwell, and with the help of Hoppy (John Hopkins). That kind of exposure within the Arts Lab context and the possibility to be able to get hold of gear, a video camera and a monitor connected by a cable was all it was. Ian and I did a couple of pieces using that. One was during *Art Spectrum,* which I think was 1969 or 1970. We did a piece, it was a kind of performance piece and the third party was Kevin Coyne. It was about the IRA. I remember Ian stating during this performance 'We are in a state of war!' It was in relationship to a headline that had come out at the time about the IRA. That was using a close circuit set up. About a year later, I used the closed circuit set up for a performance that was taking place at the Angela Flowers Gallery. From that I made a film, which was digitally restored recently. It was called *One*. The film was about the video image. Essentially the film dealt with the video and its ambiguities. That ambiguity came about because the small screen we had in the window of Angela Flowers Gallery, relaying

the image of these guys upstairs in the gallery shovelling earth around in a circle for the entire length of the day came out very kind of fuzzily. It was poorly lit up there so it was quite difficult to make out what the image was but it was remarkably similar to the image on many of the monitors in the TV shops. That was the point when one of the moon landings were happening, so that the two images were very ambiguous, and the film actually explored that ambiguity. Certainly at that stage it was moving backwards and forwards through these things particularly. It was moving backwards and forwards until I could get access to video equipment. I borrowed it as and when I could, from people like Hoppy, and so it moved backwards and forwards between being partly film, partly video. There was a film I made in 1972 called *Tender Kisses*, which actually begins with white noise from a monitor recorded on to film. I took it through a series of film processes. I was fascinated by white noise. Another close circuit job I did was with the Artists Placement Group when they had an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in December 1971. That was one of the things I noticed there because we had long hours waiting for people to turn up for interviews, so I used to use the gear and make site tapes. One of those tapes was a process on white noise and the kind of distortion that the lens will introduce into that image. You have an area of slightly soft focus, with slight changes to focus on the copying cameras, causing a kind of secondary motion to start occurring. So I made a tape, which just dealt with the white noise. But, it didn't have a lot of significance somehow. It was related to some of the concerns and interests that I had with the kind of films that we were making at the time, which were very much to do with the filmic system as a representational means. It was searching in a way, for a kind of similarity or a parallel materiality to film within the video image. That's what I was interested in. But in terms of video, I didn't pursue it. I took it into the filmic realm which I was much more familiar with, and worked with it from there. At end of the kind of abstract sequence, which is to do with this white noise pattern plus colour filters that were introduced, the image is revealed for what it is. It's slightly ambiguous as to what it is at first, and at that point, basically by a slight zoom out the monitor is revealed. The white noise changes into an actual image, a sort of recognisable image, so you are then aware that the camera is recording a videotape. At that point, the camera then shows the deck with the tapes going around. On the sound track there's the sound of that Vietcong officer being shot in the streets of Saigon in 1968. It was a very traumatic event for everyone because it was relayed so widely. But we don't actually see the vision of that we only see the sound. You're actually looking at a different kind of image. At that point it comes back and it's a TV in a normal living room, in a suburban house. The film completes by a kind of short exploration or a short articulation of the space of the house and the garden outside. Then the film ends. So it was thinking through these issues as video as material but also video as culture, so the film then was the thing that was distributed not the videotape. It led to quite a few interesting discussions about those issues that were quite fresh at that time to do with television and its effect, and its function.

JH: Would you say that the work was quite political of its time?

ML: It was political in the sense that it was made outside of institutional structures. It was made through the co-operative sharing of equipment, facilities and knowledge through the artists involved. Extraordinary people like Hoppy were prepared to help out and weren't insisting on payment though, if you could afford something that would help. There was

that aspect of the political. In terms of overt political references within work; within the London Film Co-op, which I felt I was part of that discourse, we more or less agreed that overt political comment was really something that was inappropriate to the kind of experiment, the kind of investigation, the kind of research, to use today's terms, that we were doing at the time.

JH: It was partly inherent in some of the works though. When you look back on the works now, there is a residue of some political ideologies there, not just in terms of the way that the material was being used. They have politics and materiality within the art world, but there was also gender politics. In some of the visual references there certainly is a feeling that the artist is engaging with some of the kind of wider cultural discourse in the work. I ask that question in case there was something specific that you'd placed there. Was it was just part of the climate of the time around the Co-op?

ML: There was that political element as well, so the work itself was slightly suspicious of overt political reference. The way they organised and related was a political engagement with one another and the institutions that were going to work with us, or going to ignore us. As a result there were the political discussions that then flowed out all of that. In terms of overt political activity that was in relationship to party politics, that was something that happened on an individual basis. I think the current shift to DVD and digital is just doing the technology conversion. There are things I am doing with interactive digital media, which are specific to those media, but in terms of the older work, as far as I am concerned it's a straightforward technology shift. It has its advantages when it comes to films made to be shown on an analysis projector at two frames a second. Analysis projectors are long gone but using digital technology shifting it back to that kind of aesthetic base was no problem at all. Digital technology has actually enabled work to be restored and screened, which was previously unable to be screened. The point at which I shifted out of that crossover, hybrid area of 'film/video' was when we'd been in a position to purchase video gear. I then spent some time looking at video in its own right. That led to a series of videos in their own right, to be show on a video monitor in a gallery situation. Most of those pieces were made in Devon, which is where I'd moved to live in 1972. The college had acquired a couple of Portapaks and a couple of decks, so it was possible to do some crude editing but essentially it was quite obvious right from the word 'go' that this was something quite different from film. This wasn't something that you assembled. This was something that you conceived more or less as, in film terms, a continuous take. So the pieces that I set out at that stage were developed or worked around that notion of a continuous take. The great joy of course with video at that point is that it was possible to do that for very little cost. For continuous takes in film terms you needed a budget and budgets weren't available at that time. The Arts Council were putting out probably four or five a year so it was impossible really to get any money for funding film production even. Video became, in a sense, a substitute medium, a time based medium from which, its aesthetic emerged in the same way as the film aesthetic could have emerged through practice based research. That began to develop, for me anyway, working with video and it was relatively spontaneous too. There was no need to do a lot of preparation it was just a matter of 'I've got an idea. I think it will work. I'll just make sure the batteries charged and I'll do it tomorrow.' or 'I'll do it this afternoon!' So I quite rapidly built up a lot of tapes, that went along for a couple of years I suppose. It ran out of steam because by that time, I was into

quite a demanding project: a series of films distributed as a group of films called, *Sheepman & The Sheared*. I was coming towards the end of that project, those films were made over a six-year period, and it was coming to the point where I had to really pull that series together. So I put the video camera down. But then *The Video Show* happened in 1975. So I went back through all of that work I'd done in 1972 and 1973. There was interesting stuff in there that was transferred on to a compilation tape. The exhibition organisers then transferred the tape to Philips. Philips sponsored the cassettes for that show and they undertook the transfers. Of course that video format disappeared the following year so all those tapes were useless.

JH: What was it about the videotape technology that you stuck with and carried on with do you think?

ML: Its convenience and low cost.

JH: Specifically more than anything else?

ML: More than anything else. I was not interested in what I'd seen. I couldn't see any potential in what some people were doing in galleries. That didn't attract me as much as the situation where you have, not exactly a captured audience, but an audience that is engaged and are there by their own volition because they want to give attention to this time-based work. This is as opposed to working in an aesthetic where the visitor has so much more interactive relationship with the work. They can switch on or switch off their attention or their physical position or the way in which they choose to mix what might be coming out of one monitor with what might be coming out of another monitor. In a sense it was a kind of video version of expanded cinema but I didn't get excited with it in those terms. I tended to work with it in the same way as I used Super 8. It was as a notebook format really, only in the case of video, it was much more ephemeral. The tapes would be recycled. It wasn't something I saw as being completed in its own right. I guess for that reason the video artists didn't really give me very much attention. In a sense I didn't mind that because I was conscious that I wasn't working in the same area as they were. By the same token, once the filmmakers realised that I was working in video, they were somewhat askance. I was really amazed at that kind of split. 'I'm a filmmaker I don't touch video.' Maybe it was because most of the artists had been through a classical art school education and I hadn't. I had spent a foundation year in an art college but then I'd gone into a stream which was much less to do with aesthetics and much more to do with competences basically. The college didn't provide very much of a contextual programme. What happened was that the students invented their own. We had our own seminars around photographs, we did out own photo critiques where members of staff weren't even there.

JH: I think the Co-op was a very unique context. It was a blip in a way, because there is certainly nothing like that now. Some extraordinary work came out of that context because of what it was in terms of its complex dialogues that were taking place and the quite stringent beliefs of some of the artists. It propelled this kind of philosophical centre that we were lucky to have in the UK.

ML: I think it's maybe because the discourse shifts around. I've come to realise this since moving out of solely a visual arts context. Currently I'm working in a Faculty of Information Technologies so I'm working with people who are scientists. In perusing this PhD, part of the need is really to understand what it is I'm doing in relationship to the kind of discourses they've having in faculties like that. So I've spent the past year reading a lot of papers and discovering that there are some incredibly interesting discussions taking place about these scientists. They are not all setting up empirical experiments that are about measuring this and measuring that. They are actually writing extremely interesting stuff that is very philosophical in the way that much of what was written and discussed in the 1970s was only from a slightly different perspective. I think if people want to engage with discourse it's a matter of finding where it is, rather than feeling it should be happening.

JH: Right. That's true. Within the academies it is certainly happening, but to go back to the gallery situation, it's not happening there.

ML: I don't think it really ever did. There were some interesting articles written as a critical response to certain exhibitions or certain pieces but really that's where it stopped. I think that's why I never moved any closer in that direction. It sort of shifted again in the 1980's because television, which had always been distant, then became a possibility again. Although actually in my case it hadn't been distant because I had worked in it. I continued to have my friends from those days within television. I was still a member of the Film and Television Union, which I'd joined when I worked in TV, so I still had those kind of links. They were not very active links and of course they'd had that incident with the Westward Television.

JH: What incident was that?

ML: Westward Television, for some reason, set up an art competition in the west of England. It was open to all forms of art and amazingly enough they'd included film and video. This was in 1973 or 1974 and it was in conjunction with South West Arts. They had quite a vigorous visual arts office there at that moment. It was an early example of industry sponsorship and it was pretty well organised, pretty well publicised and pretty well promoted. The exhibition was open for about a month and they handed out cash prices to the various artists, including myself and a couple of others in that particular film and video category, but when it came to exhibiting our work they couldn't handle it. They didn't know how to do it.

JH: So they didn't want to broadcast it?

ML: They said, 'Yes, we are going to include your work in the programme that we are making about the competition.' That's where the discussion began to develop around: 'You are a television station, I've won the prize, show the film!'
'Oh no, no, no, no. We can't do that.'

JH: Did that discussion go on for quite some time?

ML: Oh yes. It turned into quite a blue. The discussion actually started before the prize-winning ceremony. By the time the prize-winning ceremony came along with the Chairman of the Arts Council present, handing out the prizes, they had said 'Categorically we are not going to be showing your work. We will show an excerpt of your work.' So I got the other time-based winners together around that issue and they all agreed that it was not acceptable. So we produced the broad sheet and handed it out at the prize winning

JH: At the prize winning?

ML: It was a very, very rude thing to do, but the only way to get the attention.

JH: And did it? Did it make them broadcast the works?

ML: No, it didn't but a couple of months later they did a monthly kind of arts programme which, for a small station based in Plymouth wasn't bad going in retrospect. They decided to set up a discussion between myself and their anchorman.

JH: On TV?

ML: Yes. Rod Allen who was editor of Broadcast, the trade magazine, and I taped it straight off the TV when it went out.

JH: Do you still have it?

ML: I discovered that I still had a copy of it just couple of months ago. It was an interesting encounter. The whole event was documented into a booklet and 100 copies were made and posted to all the people who I thought needed to know: all the video artists I knew, a few critics and a few writers. In other words, people who should know about what's going on in relationship between video, film, art, and television. My feedback was very disappointing. It was quite an engagement with that whole problem area and it flushed out all of the things that needed to be flushed out. I just thought, 'Well the reason there's not much coming back on this is because I am down in Devon and they are up in London'

JH: When you say, 'not coming back', do you mean from the artists particularly?

ML: Yes. That's right.

JH: It is difficult because there were issues of regions, but David Hall's *Interventions* must have gone out by then. That was in 1971 up in Scotland and then there was 1976, did he not respond to it? Because I would have thought he would have agreed with most of what you were dealing with.

ML: Yes. Certainly some people did respond but overall it was a pretty disappointing comeback.

JH: But not much later Channel 4 was set up in 1981.

ML: Yes, well I was involved in those discussions because I was still a member of the ACT. I was very supportive of the workshop initiative. Although the main push for that came from the folks in Newcastle, Murray Martin and people, I was invited to be part of that working group and by that time, I had really become quite frustrated with the absence of that level of engagement at the Co-op. Each time I came to a Co-op meeting it seemed that they were arguing about who to employ or who not to employ. There was that level of frustration and also the fact several of us the Co-op were not central core members. This was always a problem with the Co-op. Unless you lived within the sound of the processing machine you weren't really considered a proper member.

JH: Could you talk a little bit more about where the works were shown and what the context was for your art works including television and broadcast?

ML: Most of the work was distributed. The film work was distributed through the Film Co-op, and there was one tape, the compilation tape that was with LVA. There was a reasonably steady stream of rentals of the films through the Film Co-op but probably most of what I managed to recover in terms of rentals was through visiting screenings usually to art colleges, occasionally to cinema tech type places, and screening centres. And amongst those I would also tape some of the video work from that compilation era. And very occasionally even some Super 8 stuff. That lead to the *Image ConText* series of works. It started off as reflecting upon visits of standing up in front of the students, introducing the work, screening it and saying 'Any questions?' I just felt that that was really unsatisfactory because most of the students, in many of the cases, were completely new to this kind of approach to working with film. *Image ConText* came out of trying to contextualise the work using various means. Those presentations were a bit like performances in some senses. I used different means of presentation and they were different each time I did them, but essentially they were multi-media in the hyphenated state. They were extremely successful. They never failed to work because they left things hanging. Essentially the works in themselves were complete. These were aesthetic objects from which you could derive different amounts, or different levels of engagement. Understanding the experience of those, worked in different ways with different people. The stuff that surrounded the screenings themselves was designed to be rather provocative. It was always productive in terms of the discussions that would usually happen within the student bodies. That mode of presenting the work continued for some time until it had its day. I then archived it on to videotape. Both versions became archived and then that archiving process continued to the present day with the migration of Umatic onto DVD. The work is still available on DVD although the further you get away from the point at which it was generated at the end of the 70's, then the more the references within it become more and more difficult to understand within the specific references to the context of today.

JH: What about the broadcast works?

ML: That was another project, which South West Arts set up. By this time Westward television had been taken over by another company called Television South West. One of the advisors to that company was Jonathan Harvey of ACME Housing fame. He had the ear of the managing director because they went to school together. Good old British institutions. I guess it came out of a dinner time conversation because when those companies made

their proposals to the IBA they had to explain how it was they were going to include local cultural coverage or context, and Jonathan had obviously got to this MD in time, and said 'What about having some artists in residence'. So that scheme was set up within TSW. The first person to do that residency was Stuart Brisley. It ended up as a tape, which was broadcast. I think it was about a half-hour tape, it was very interesting work. I just found out about a year ago, because I suddenly wondered what happened to the tapes we all made, that amazingly enough, apparently the entire tape body went into an archive in Plymouth.

JH: It was made by South West Television?

ML: Yes, TSW – Television South West.

JH: What was the piece called that you made?

ML: *The Body on Three Floors*

JH: Do you remember when was that broadcast?

ML: 1983 or 1984. It was a 50-minute programme.

JH: Did you achieve your ambitions regarding the dissemination of your work?

ML: When it comes down to it, you make this work because it's important to you to make this work. It's only when working in a context like television that you're conscious that you're making it for a particular kind of audience with a particular kind of expectation. There's always that level of disappointment that the work isn't been rented out more often or being included in exhibitions more frequently. Of course I've got that problem not only being cross-disciplinary, cross-art form but now, cross-nationality. So I've been excluded from certain events or publications in Britain because I'm living in a different country. I've had discussions with people about that because it really is completely crazy when you produce a whole body of work, which is sighted very specifically within this culture and yet exclusion occurs simply because of geographical location. It's completely nonsensical. I've curated work. I did a little bit of curating work in England, mostly in the context of the Art College in Exeter but I've done more curating since being in Australia. In fact I did quite a big international show of CD-ROM based art work for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. So I know the problems associated with selection. In that particular case though, it wasn't so difficult. At the point where I did the research and the selection, there wasn't a lot of work around. The whole point of the show was to bring it, not only a public attention, but specifically to artists' attention. There was a great level of curiosity in the mid-nineties about what this digital computer-based medium could offer. That show really was about some of the approaches that had been taken to that point in time. That aspect of exclusion didn't really rear up there. When there is a plethora then it is something that really does become difficult but if it's done on the basis of geographical placing then it's different.

JH: What ideas and other works or other artists' works do you think influenced your work or were inspirational to you as an artist?

ML: It would be the filmmakers essentially. In the video area, certainly artists like David Hall and Stuart Marshall were influential. David Dye, because he tended to work across both film and video. A large part of the Co-op project was a historical project as well of re-exploring the work done by artists from when film was invented, so all of that stuff would have a big feed in. There was Gerry Schum, the gallery owner, and some of the American artists who were working with video. William Wegman I remember very well, I appreciated that work very much. Less so, Vito Acconci and the more minimal video artists, that was something I exposed myself to but it really didn't take me much further than that.

JH: Do you think that editing has been an important aspect of your process across all the moving image technologies you've used, because you talked about being an editor professionally? With reference to the short period of time when videotape was one take, and once you could get to the point where you could edit it in a similar way to film, do you think there was an issue between film and video in terms of that aspect of the process of your work?

ML: Yes. They really are different things to be working with. In film it's almost like you're working with a material like wood. It's so solid. It's so present. You can virtually eat it. The kind of precision that you can bring to it is so spot on. A lot of the film work, works with quite short intervals, 12 frames and 24 frames. That's present throughout almost all of the film work, whereas the video work is more towards the longer duration. In fact in *The Body on Three Floors*, the final section of that programme actually lasts about 20 minutes. It's more or less a 20-minute continuous take.