REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70's & 80's
Interview with Tony Sinden

Interview by Dr Jackie Hatfield

JH: Which of your works do you consider to be the most seminal or important?

TS: My work is continued and in a way I suppose looking back it's very hard to actually say which are the best works because I sometimes rediscover something like, for instance, *Behold*, which I made in 1974. That seems to be a key work but I didn't recognise it at the time. I probably didn't recognise it two or three years ago. But it was the first time when I was able to make the installation that opened up the ground for me, particularly working in the gallery. I wasn't so interested in working with the single screen at that time. In my film work I was working with multiple projection and what we called then expanded cinema. I was using the gallery as a lab, a place to actually make work rather than just exhibit work. Things were actually being set up and one was working with the situation as you found it. It wasn't until you went into the gallery that you found it. With *Behold*, magically, I was able to have nine small video monitors. I'd been thinking about the early days of motion picture *Muybridge's* sequential work. The ideas that I was looking at were about movement in space and in film and with video. I had this sudden idea that I could make a piece, which represented that in a visual way but also conceptually played on the way I would show it. The piece involved a plank set up against a chair to give it a slope and nine video monitors, lined up on the plank. I'd filmed a life model running around in a circle and then I played the same image through the nine monitors. It fed each one using the vertical control, let the image slip across the screen and what was interesting is that the monitors sometimes create this illusion of movement from ground level to the end of the piece. It was also a piece where you could see the thing in the round. I wanted the technology to be part of it, not to fetishise it, but so that there was nothing hidden. It was very typical of the time. A lot of artists were working in other media – photography, film, performance – where they were trying to break down the conventions of showing and in sense to reveal all the parts, which could become part of the work. This is one of those pieces that seemed to do it. A later piece that I made for the Hayward Gallery, in 1979, called *Another Aspect Another Time* worked with a similar idea but with film projection. I was working laterally across several medias so it's hard to contain myself within video without referencing other works. I was working with film, performance, music and photography. But this one shared the same idea of movement, placing objects, moving objects around space. By 1979 I was quite well established in terms of my installation work. I was working mostly in gallery situations and each year getting another opportunity to take my work further. So that piece was quite significant. In the Eighties I made several works in America, I lived there for four and a half years, but when I came back to England in 1984/85 I found a very different culture from the one I'd left. Experimental works weren't so apparent, there seemed to be less opportunities for film and video makers except on Channel 4. The new commissions were very much about works commissioned for the box. I personally wasn't so interested in taking that route. So I met up with a group of other artists and

we formed a group called *Housewatch* where we decided to make works, which would be shown in the street using a house with projectors in it. The images would be projected on the windows. I made a whole series of works over a period of almost 15 years with Housewatch where I was using different kinds of location to present film and video works. One of the pieces that I really thought, for me, was the most interesting, was a piece called *Turbulence*, which I made in 1992. It was shown originally on a house that *Housewatch* had designed, which was made out of timber and rice-paper in a traditional Japanese style teahouse. That piece worked in lots of different ways, both as a moving image work but also that architecture, how an art work can be shown out on the street but also can actually sort of change environment. In a way there's a certain interaction between the way you read these pieces and how the public respond. But when you are working outside of the gallery you are dealing with a different environment and a different response. I've always been interested in the way artists are not trapped by the notion of career or fitting into something, but how you are opening up ground constantly and, in a sense, finding a new audience or finding a new public. There are two recent pieces that are important to me. One is called *Call Room*, which was a reflection on my earlier work made in the gallery. I was stepping back into the gallery space after an absence of a few years and how I dealt with that in terms of a blank canvas. The other piece is called *Dichotomy* and is a reflection on landscape and the things that are embedded in our landscape philosophically and culturally, but how often we forget them. It's interesting that with the war in Iraq the whole thing has come up again. We're going to war, we don't want to go to war but the government ignore us. How memory doesn't seem to serve us well. You can talk about what happened 20 years ago, 30 years ago but people have short memories. We almost really want sometimes to forget things and then we go through the whole thing again. So those works are key works. I'm sure there are others, but I suppose they mark significant shifts in my practice over a period of 30 years.

JH: You haven't really mentioned your film work but you did work on the single screen with *Edge* for example, it was very performative and it was also spatial because you were playing with the viewer.

TS: That film was made as a collaboration with *David Hall*. It was one of five films we made together and the focus was then on cinema both in terms of its conventions of its language and other subject matter that you might find in film. When we set up, we hoped that these films would be shown in cinema and not just the avant-garde circuit. *Edge* deals with very conventional western themes, but it is talking about the composition and how the camera frames the subject and how you're lead on through the film until you are at the edge of the frame. Then you're left with yourself looking at a blank landscape. Those single screen works are always looking at the edge of the screen or the process involved with the editing. Perhaps it was also in a process of things that the public would not know about, but we would try to address them so that they would address a broader public than just a small circuit of avant-garde filmmakers.

JH: Technology has always been a key and important part of the process, or certainly part of the outcomes of your work. Could you talk about your use of video technology when that became available for artists?

TS: It was in the early 70's. It is curious, because in making films, I was using the projector in the gallery space. It was what we called at that time '*expanded cinema*'. I had made also a piece with *David Hall* called *60 TV Sets*, which we showed in *Gallery House* in 1972. That's not purely video, but it was looking at the monitor or the screen or the object, the box and in a way displacing it by putting it into gallery space. There was this idea that these things would somehow make sense when we installed them. They were quite subversive in there time, but when I had access to video which would have been probably around 1972, 1973, it was monochrome and a very unstable medium. I found it very hard in the beginning to work with, because the image wasn't stable and you would spend endless times tweaking the stuff to keep it going. It took me a while to feel confident enough to make a piece of work with it. I made a number of early pieces, which unfortunately I've lost, but they were about just shooting and editing in camera. Often you'd be using the aperture and the burning out images. There are several cameras I destroyed, like probably a number of other artists, by burning the image on to the tube. I became more confident with it but I used to suffer from migraines and in a way this is curious because I used to get a headache when I made my work. That may or may not have had something to do with the subject matter or the way I was dealing with it. For instance *Behold* actually was very much a thing that started off as an installation, but I realised that I had to film something in a certain way. So I had certainly a way of working with it and then of course with the other pieces. I was thinking of the technology in terms of installation more than the single screen works, so I'd already moved towards installation. Things had to work on a number of monitors in a way that would work with space as well as being something on a single screen. A piece like *Another Aspect*, which was made in 1978, was very much a piece made using editing. It is not a montage exactly, but it's a constriction of a series of shots, much the same way some of my earlier films would have been. But in a way, the other art thing that was interesting at that time, a lot of other artists were doing it, was the allied surveillance camera. A camera being set up for long duration looking at something and then showing that thing in some way of form, whether it was recording or live in the gallery. But it took me a while to feel comfortable with the technology. I was never really what I would say, like some artists would say a 'video artist'. I was using video but I was also using other media at the time and it seemed to be quite interesting to have that access now and again. What was interesting was that there was a sudden availability of portable cameras, although they were not so portable. They weighed a ton, but you could go out of the studio and into the street and start making work. That independence was also very important and you didn't really need a budget. You didn't need a lot of money to go and shoot a video. What you needed was just the access, to find out what you could do with it. I had no fixed expectations of what would be the outcome of the video work I was making. One would discover things as you made them and then build on that experience. I work this way. I start by trying to work with a blank canvas wherever possible. I don't really have a fixed expectation of the outcome, and then I find out in the process of making, what the work is going to be. It is something you will find with any other artist, but I you get familiar with certain things you're looking for. You just need that period when you have the camera, and then you'll make the work, and then things come out of it. You start to actually to see what it is you are making. I like the idea of discovery still even now. I'm supposed to know what I'm doing, but it's like I don't really want to be tied to something. I never work with a script, or I very rarely do. Maybe there is a synopsis or a general idea, but I think that's the difference between someone working as an artist with video or film from those people working in industry where there are a lot of other

criteria shaping how you're going to start. I think one would trust one's judgement eye with the medium to find out what it could do for you or what possibilities you could put it into in terms of galleries or shows. Obviously and I had a certain awareness of what was going on in America and Europe in the late sixties with the sudden appearance of video, and there was a book, Expanded Cinema, which came out about that time in 1970. It was amazing really what had happened already and what was about to happen in England in terms of video. Internationally there were a lot of different artists approaching video in a new and fresh way but there weren't any fixed expectations of it. Obviously once people started to work with it, there seemed to be a common concern, or theme, or approach, but it was at the beginning, so in a way you weren't limited by what you could do with it. There was obviously a lot of excess, which is what happens, but it was establishing itself. When I first showed video in the gallery, there were a lot of people saying, 'Is video art?' 'Is it art?' and I thought 'Well I am an artist and I am working with video', but in a sense that was too philosophical. You have to say why it was art and I thought 'Well let them decide' because in a way you're not trying to control how people read things, you want people to discover it for themselves. There was a lot of debate about whether video was art. The same debate that film had had as well, and what was curious, was that some filmmakers were saying the same thing about video. They weren't seeing it as art. There was a blind spot somewhere but of course it is art like anything else. It would be interesting to look back at some of the arguments that were going on then and see how things have changed or not. What I was trying, at the beginning of something, was quite exciting.

JH: So would it be true to say that the first piece you made in video was *60 TV Sets* or were there works before that?

TS: Yes, although I had a film shown on television in 1968.

JH: So which piece was that?

TS: It was Standard 8 piece called *Tongue*, but when I saw it on television I didn't like it at all. I think the programme was called *Review*. They were showing some independent films and the BFI had heard about me working down in Brighton along with other artists, *Jeff Keen* etc, and this film was shown on this arts programme, but when I saw it, I was actually quite shocked to see it I had always seen TV as something else, I wasn't really working towards television. So that was the first time I had seen my own work on television. Then I worked with David on the *Interruption* pieces and contributed to them. We were much more if you like confronting the medium so in a sense we were dealing again with those expectations of what things are on TV, but they were films they weren't videos. The first work that was moving more towards TV of video was *60 TV Sets*. 'Installation' was a very new word in England at that time. I'm not sure where it originated whether it was Germany or America, but I liked the idea that you install something. It's not there forever. You are intervening on something where there would be perhaps a painting or sculpture show.

JH: Can I just ask you a little bit more about the Television Interventions in 1971, they were made on sixteen-millimetre weren't they?

TS: Yes, that's right.

JH: So was that a collaboration with David Hall as well?

TS: No it wasn't really because it was David's project. We met in 1969. We were making our films but we had a rapport and in some ways I could see some possibilities. Dave and me got on very well, so when we went up there, I think he had one idea and then during the next week or so we just worked off the top of out head, filmed, edited and it went out the following day.

JH: Do you appear in any of the films? Because he is in one of them isn't he?

TS: Yes, I think I do. There is a time lapse one. Also when we were filming through TV sets we were both filming on some traffic lights, and one of them is me. There is another person, *Rodney Wilson*, from the Arts Council, David, *Anna Ridley*, etc. But it was interesting, we were thinking very hard, shooting very hard, editing, working, and watching them on a TV set in a butcher's somewhere in a village outside of Edinburgh as they went out. So it's a very exiting opportunity to be involved with that and so we discovered that we did have a lot in common in terms of collaborating ideas at that time. We could help each other and that fed into several other pieces, the five films that we made together and the TV installations that we showed together. But then it came to an end in the way these things do you know. I've obviously worked and shown with other artists and they have a life, but you don't know how long it will work. It worked fine for a while, and then you realise you want to go off on your own thing again.

JH: So you were involved with the *101 TV Sets* as well, was a collaboration?

TS: Yes

JH: And you did another piece at the video show didn't you?

TS: Yes. There was *101 TV Sets*, and I did a thing called *Video Vacuum* and *Rotary Play Thing*, of which unfortunately the tape is lost. But I think one was exploring a technology, which had some very different parameters from film. The live thing, the pre-recorded thing and the monitor thing were all part of it. You just had to be brave and go out and do it. Looking through that show there was such a variety of proposals, it reminds you really what people's expectations were of video but also what the common themes were. For instance there was the surveillance thing, looking at the camera or being on a square monitor. I can't remember any projection pieces at that show, although there was a thing where it said *Beyond the Big Screen* and that might have been. I don't know whether there was one there although I had seen a projection by *Peter Campus* in Knokke in Belgium. I was very impressed by that piece because it was so subtle. It was a very low-key shadow of himself cast across a wall. Obviously the shadow in film is a very topical thing and very much a metaphor. I thought how subtle this piece was, it wasn't going out to grab you, you just didn't know whether there was anyone there. There was also the piece by *Nam June Paik* with the Monitor and the Buddha looking at the camera. They are two very different works but very significant in terms of one addressing something using a light and the other one addressing looking at the camera. That endless gaze of the Buddha back into the camera and on to the Sony monitor was very sculptural. I mean I can't remember whether that was 1974 or 1975 when I saw those works but it was around the same

time. What was interesting was that if you showed with artists from America or Europe you often found you had similar things going on in your work. The question of who did what first didn't seem to be relevant. Ideas like 'British Art' weren't important. The main thing was to discover that there were other artists working with something that was going to change something. It wasn't just fitting in to what was going on before it. It was like when I went to a *Josef Beuys* lecture, I didn't understand very much about what he was talking about but him being there with these blackboards, was something exciting for a young guy. It was like 'Hey! This is really interesting!'

JH: Was that the workshop he did in Scotland?

TS: Yes, it was up in Scotland through *Richard DeMarco*. I think I might have been with David Hall. But in a sense you see this was the thing, there was *Beuys*, there was *Michael Snow*. There were lots of different artists working on a different threshold with a different expectation. Some were using this technology and others were actually approaching art as a scientist might do. We were taking it apart. *John Latham* and the Artist Placement Group were really interesting artists at the time. The Arts Council were involved but they weren't so much involved with the funding of this stuff. You were working out of your own pocket on a shoestring. Often you never got paid to do things, you just did them if there was an opportunity. But when I reflect back on it, the art scene seemed to be smaller then. There were fewer artists working, perhaps, with these technologies. But you knew all of them, you might meet up, you might show together. What was interesting too, was that actually things were happening in photography and performance art. There was discovery going on and no one could claim to be first. Everyone seemed to be making work at the time. Some of those works survived but a lot of them are lost forever. Another thing about technology is that when I came to show the whole again, I realised that the stuff I was using then, which was state of the art at that time, no longer exists. It's very hard to show those early works.My feeling is to be faithful to the original, because it was always unstable as a medium in the early days. You'd run a tape once and you'd suddenly find a stretch mark with it. I can see that on the tapes that I have transferred onto DVD. What was exciting was that you weren't working with the idea of a future for this work. Maybe you were making work, or at least for myself, it was something where you were in some way celebrating the thing that *Duchamp* said, 'the transient nature of the object, the work of the image.' You were sort of pushing the limits of the technology, but like a lot of artists approaching the technology, they tried to reinvent it for themselves. That happened with film and it happened with photography. We kind of went back to the beginning and thought, 'Well if I was inventing this, how would I use it?' Obviously looking at things, which the technology was not necessarily made for, the process becomes the subject matter. In that structural period we were looking at the grain of images or the join in a film. We were discovering something that now is extremely minimal but which was really important to get it in terms of, 'this was made by an artist. It's not made for broadcast, it's not about that seamless product' It was like someone drawing with a piece of chalk all the way. There was this sort of conceptual play on the look of the work. Some artists fought to keep their work pristine and other artists went with the age of deterioration because that's the way it was. For me that technology has always been part of a lateral thing of looking and reassessing and showing the work with knowledge of other things going on. It has not always been about this monitor or this video, it's actually an attitude as a way of looking. In contemporary art, you can see across a range of different artists work. It's not just associated with one

medium. One of the weaknesses, or one of the things I regret, about the seventies, is that so much of the work was only seen amongst other artists. It didn't reach a wider public and I think part of the reason for that was that the art historians and people who were trained to write about contemporary art weren't taking videos very seriously, or film for that matter, or performance. There's always a feeling they felt it should go away. Maybe they didn't know how to look at it or didn't want to sit there. They wanted it to conform to something that they already had in their head. It was often artists who were writing about the work, such as David Hall etc. They were obviously needed a broader response. *Richard Cork* who was the editor of *Studio International* may have had some influence on this. I've always respected him because I think he has, as a traditional historian, gone out to look at new work. But there were so few others writing seriously and giving it a position, you felt you were outside, but in a way that gave you strength too because you thought, 'I'm not going to hang around for these guys to catch up!' You never really got an in-depth review. It was always video first and then the artist. It was not talking about the artist's work, it was talking about the technology, so it's almost suggested that they couldn't look at the subject matter or the subject that you've chosen to work with.

JH: So the historians or the academy, weren't acknowledging this work, but there were only a few art schools dealing with or using performance or time based works, as well. Maybe that was key to it not being an established mode of working in the UK.

TS: Yes. I think this is part of the reason why a lot of artists started to work with it, because it wasn't part of an idea, of an establishment or a known history except to say cinema. They were also always watching TV. But to start to work with it, seemed to be a new opportunity. There wasn't any kind of fixed expectation of it. In other words it didn't really get the coverage because it didn't seem to conform to some expectation of what this technology was in terms of the traditions of art and academia. Even though, the history of contemporary art in the last 100 years is full of innovation and experimentation. Perhaps there was a worry that it might take over. Obviously that's still going on. There's still this debate about a condition of painting. When I started, the term 'Painting is dead' was around. I thought, 'How ridiculous!' I can understand why you would say it, maybe you provoke something or other so that these sleepy painters would get up and do something different. But it seemed ridiculous when half of the people I was showing to were painters, who were interested in what I was doing. Is the art world so conservative that it can't accept change or it doesn't know how to look at change? Or something other than what has already been established or fixed? For all the great ideas that come through art, it still seems to me that we come to a very limited notion of what it is about and where art takes place.

JH: Perhaps making video, there have always been difficulties funding works that use technologies. Unless you have a strategy where you work with the industry or something like that, which in itself is quite restrictive. There's no real laboratory. It's interesting to talk about the gallery as a laboratory or place to play or experiment. As well as the university or the art school that's the only other place really.

TS: Yes, maybe it is a different kind of art and it's not necessary to be part of the establishment. Maybe that is OK. It doesn't really have to be. But, you can see how those early ideas are feeding the current generation, or have done already. But there is no acknowledgement to that earlier period from a broader number of historians. They

don't necessary know how to address it, or perhaps they are now aware of it, and they prefer not to know about it. I'm not being paranoid, it's just that you do know who was doing what and how you see something recently and there's no knowledge of that early work. Is this the way the world is? In the art world they try to forget or not to know about these other things that have shaped subsequently what's going on now. All you need to do is to be acknowledged in that broader sphere, not just as a video artist or film artist but in the wider spectrum of art. You don't have to take all of the video artists and say, 'This is going to show everyone.' Someone can be selective and just look at one or two. That's the way it is. At least it's putting it into what happens in painting and sculpture, in that tradition. I also wonder about this notion of what an art historian is. There are different kinds. There are historians who are much more contemporary and receptive. Maybe they don't want to sort of say, 'I am a historian'. They are just reviewing something in its time. As an artist, I've always just wanted to be in my time, not thinking about history as if it's over. It can become very limiting if every step of the way there's a conscious appraisal. You can't just move on and then discover 20 or 30 years later that you were doing something really interesting. In a way there has to be a balance struck where you are not actually trying to get into the history books. I think what it was, was that England is a very small place. There was an awful lot happening in the seventies, not just in London, but in the north-east etc. There were all kinds of artists working with this technology but not many people are aware of this. There was a revolution going on, but it would have been good for someone at the time to actually have somehow acknowledged it apart from the artists themselves.

JH: Video technology was very gallery oriented though, which is different from the film work of its era, because the filmmakers did want to be in the cinema even when there might be a performance in there. They wanted to subvert that notion but a lot of them didn't want to be in the gallery.

TS: Yes, I remember. It was the same period that I was selected by *The Arnolfini* in 1975 to do a show using the gallery space with projectors. I'd shown this piece at the *ICA* as part of the *Expanded Cinema Festival,* which was in the same year, and I showed with *William Raban, Jeff Keen*, *Ron Hasleden*, *David Dye*. Then *The Arnolfini* year after said, 'Come back and do another piece.' This was touring as a solo show and by then I had realised that for me, taking that technology out and putting it in the gallery was opening up something, which I really got excited about. It was no longer necessarily about the cinema auditorium, or the film process in the way I had been dealing with it. Obviously those things shaped the initial work that I made because I realised that I was actually introducing something to a very different audience who were not aware of all this stuff. It was the same with video in a way. It wasn't just video, it's how you use video in the context of a gallery in terms of space, people moving around not sitting down watching it in the way you do at home, or in the cinema. You're dealing with a very different context. It is not just in the institution, but in the way people work with the building, and how you might work with that through your works, whether it's film or video or projection or whatever. I would bring in all this stuff and really use the gallery as my studio to make the work and discover a way of dealing with that setting. Architecture became very much a feature of what I was doing, although with the video monitor, for me it was very hard to deal with it in terms of a large space. Things tended to be quite small scale except for *101 TV Sets*, which *David Hall* and I set up in the *Serpentine Gallery*. That was a real hard graft job. When we did that, we were hardly speaking to each other actually. We were so caught up in cabling the thing, you can

imagine with 101 TVs. This is the other thing with installation, particularly that piece as well. The guy who had the shop dealt in second-hand TVs. He was a very nice guy, I can't remember his name, but he got involved with the project. Eventually we got him to come to the Serpentine to keep it going because with technology at that time, it was always breaking down. You'd get a phone call saying 'The tape is not running' or 'This is not working' and he became an integral part of the work. He actually had a white coat on. I'm sure David will tell you another version of this but it was fantastic to think this thing was involving someone who actually was selling TVs. Putting them into the gallery appropriated his shop, we wiped him out, but I think we actually encouraged him to go out and buy more because he had to find more for us. The TVs themselves were all shapes and sizes that went back 25 years, so in some ways that was another interesting aspect. We were dealing with the history of TV there, some of the screens were circular and some were wide. There were all kinds, old and used. Again it was a piece that accumulated created space as it went along. Depending on the programming when you went into the gallery, it was a conditioned work so one day it might be *Coronation Street* or Football. I remember we went in one Saturday and people were watching the FA Cup Final. This was just what was going on the gallery, which was at the time quite a subversive thing. People were sitting there looking at it for the football. They weren't actually looking at it as a piece of work. So the piece, every day, you'd have a different take on it. Then there was a day when there was a strike on TV, or there was this card saying 'Normal programmes will be resumed as soon as possible'. Then there was a thing, it wasn't Nixon, it was the next president who was on TV. I remember going in and seeing the American President sitting there, in the Serpentine gallery, with his head looking out talking about something. I remember thinking I wanted my work to be like a book after that show. It was the *101 TV Sets* that did it. It was such a noise threshold too that I really wanted to create something more reflective but questioning. I did not want bums on seats, I wanted a one-to-one thing maybe, which you get in the gallery of course. Some people would say 'Well if there's only one person here it can't be any good!' but I am actually really interested in what people think and not the group. It's like creating things, which enable someone to look at a work for hours, if they want to, and find out what has being going on, or what the work is about. So I was using myself as a reflector in that sense. My preference was not to move towards television. I preferred the quiet of the gallery and finding something there, which maybe had that sense of one-to-one.

JH: How have changing technologies altered your artistic output?

TS: I have a healthy respect for technology but I'm not consumed by it. I still like the idea that I can just use my wrist and a pencil and draw something. It's in a flash and it's an idea, a concept. As an artist, I have ideas, which can be made very simply with technology. Others which will require a budget and even the state of the art, but I try to keep it in balance and not to be limited. It's just production values. In a way different ideas require different techniques or bits of technology. It's important to keep that option, in the same way as any other artist perhaps. If you're painting in oils or you're working with expensive materials you've got to have a commission, but you can always draw in a book. It's equally important. Or you can sit and write it on the screen. You don't need necessary always to have everything in order to work it. Technology now is obviously very accessible to everyone, but it's the way you use it I think which is really important. Also the way you perceive it. You can turn things around slightly and I've often thought, 'God what's the difference between me making a video and someone

else?' It's just the way you've trained yourself to look at things and question certain things. It's taking something that everyone's doing, and then turning it on its head. You're creating another perspective and another viewpoint on it.

JH: There are different kinds of art evolving with different status for different kinds of art. My belief is there are strict boundaries between shop art, or the gallery where you sell it. You sell, so therefore it's a commodity. Then there is the academy, which is a place where you can still make things that are for its own sake for the idea's sake. You were talking about technology, and it triggered off in my mind that maybe technology, as an idea, is more about the thought process for artists of the academy. Whereas for artists that make objects to sell, there's something else going on. I think there is a real difference.

TS: Although I think, with those few artists who had managed to sell their videos, they are objects now. It's interesting with limited editions, but in some ways it's interesting that there are very few English artists of my generation who managed to sell, I don't know if there's very much apart from *Gilbert and George,* to public collection of the Arts Council. I don't know whether that elevates your work to a wider audience. Probably, it does because the museums would be more receptive.

JH: I don't know, because there's a pretty good market for films like *Window Water Baby Moving*, and things that you wouldn't see in a museum or in the academy very often. It's probably the same with films like *Ballet Mécanique*. Its market is if you see it only in terms of commodity perhaps. It's a resonant one that goes on because you are reaching all these young people who come in and want to learn about fine art and philosophy. It's a different market.

TS: Yes it is. It was interesting that it was only recently that collectors in America have turned to film and video. They are even building a place to house it in. That has suddenly validated it as an object. I'm not sure whether it'll change things at all but it means that the work that is collected is now being shown as public collection or collection by a private individual.

JH: But there's something a little bit dead about work that ends up in just a museum.

TS: There is, except one would say, 'Is the museum now the sexy, trendy place to be?' Is It the museum anymore? When I see Joseph Beuys' *Blackboards* I can't forget that I was there when he was writing them or drawing on them. He was 80% of the work. Now the blackboards are there without him and how do you see that? They were really just tools that he was using. It's how things change, because people would say, 'Look at the Blackboards as if they are the work.' Also the Berlin Wall was still up. Was it Wolf Karlin who did that piece with TV sets on the Berlin Wall? He was broadcasting live stuff from the West across into the East. The concept sounds really interesting for it's time. We are still working with that world. That was very much a division politically, which was having an effect on what artists were doing during the seventies. What was happening here was the early miners' strike. There were things that were happening, which you identified with as an artist. I'm sure there were references in your work somewhere. We'd talk about the democracy. We were trying to break down that division that we felt was there between art and the other things in the social context we were working in. A lot of young students were the first generation students in their

family to go to college, so they were bringing their backgrounds with them and being presented with *Joseph Beuys* or *Marcel Duchamp* or whoever. It's interesting to see how they dealt with it and how they tried to hang on to their roots as well. Video was a very useful tool in that sense. It had that documentary thing as well. It was also used for just trying something out in front of camera, where you weren't sure what the subject was that was being dealt with or acknowledged. I think it is always interesting to see what was going on around your work at the time. It was like the Watergate scandal, which was very much a media thing, shaping my thoughts at the time. Television was actually able to reveal how much of a crook this guy was because the camera somehow caught him out.

JH: Did funding stifle or enable you to achieve your ambitions with your work?

TS: When I started I didn't have any funding, so to have funding was actually something I had never anticipated. Then you realise that there was a support system for people to experiment. I guess like everyone else, you might have wanted to make work and you didn't get funding. When you did get funding it was trying to be democratic in its own way, so that was a very important thing for video and film of course, and probably other things. There was a recognition that it wasn't affordable to work with this unless you had a grant. Some of the grants were very small and some were big, but I think the smaller grants, for me, produced more interesting work. The bigger grants seemed to produce something that was trying to be something else.

JH: How did you support your process and your work financially? Did you work in art schools?

TS: I taught, yes. I was teaching from 1971, through to last year, which was 2003. It's amazing how time has flown, but I've always been teaching film, video, digital media and installation in the fine art context, obviously in England and abroad. I had experience over the years of the shifts and changes of attitudes in education, but also of students' ambitions. I always taught it as being from an artist perspective. When David Hall and I started working, he was teaching in sculpture. He wanted to set up an area, which wasn't fully time-based. It was just audio-visual. The term time-based had come up, but I don't think it had come up significantly as when we got the thing going. We had the enthusiasm to make something happen that was actually very new, I would say in England really, although there was a film department in the *Royal College of Art* and there were one or two others. This was really one of the first areas devoted totally to it as a fine art practice. We learnt as we went along how things would shape and the kind of things that we were encouraging students to do. Most of the students were either coming from painting or sculpture. They had part of Bruce McLean's concept and Paul Richards, so there was an element of performance, sculpture, conceptual art, painting, filmmaking, and structuralism. We were getting people to come in as tutors. We were getting musicians in, Brian Eno, Michael Nyman, a whole range of American visitors including Dan Graham. We were getting in people who were around and trying to keep things open. It had a broad philosophy really, but we were struggling to make things happen because we had a very limited budget. Once we moved into video it made it more possible. Film has always been expensive. Philosophically it was interesting because there were lots of other artists coming in to the area, or had something to do with the area, or were coming from other practices. It was very experimental and advanced and open in my opinion. There was a lot of suspicion from

some other departments but that's the way things are. I think we called it *Time-Based* around 1973. We realised that the common theme between a lot of the practice, film, video, performance was the duration, the time. There had been some discussion, John Latham had used the word, at an event at the Hayward Gallery with APG. I was involved with that with David Hall. It was loose enough and it was no longer *audio-visual*. *Audio-visual* was a resource really, but it attracted a lot of very diverse and interesting students. Obviously subsequently it influenced the setting up of *London Video Arts* with other artists from other colleges.

JH: Were you involved with London Video Arts?

TS: I wasn't sure if I was a label-carrying member of London Video Arts. I was working with film installation, music and all kinds of things. But, I was there at the beginning and I supported it. Sometimes I showed with it. People like Tamara Kirkorian, were certain key people that gave LVA the breadth that it needed. It wasn't just about video it was actually the way they were approaching the subject matter, the politics, the philosophy, the democracy etc. It was very interesting. But the history of teaching in fine art is very interesting. It's very political, but it's also economic. It's part and parcel of the way we support things like National Health etc, except students now have to pay for it. When I came back from America I wasn't going to go back to teaching, I was going to set up my own alternative Black Mountain College down in Wiltshire or wherever. But people persuaded me not to do it, because obviously art colleges are very important. They were funded then, but have to deal with so much bullshit to survive. Sometimes you can lose your way and forget the reason you got into teaching. It still applies that without that life-blood of practitioners, students really don't know what's going on. Once you got to know your tutors you could talk to them about everything. That is one thing that is great in England, the nattering that goes along with teaching and learning. Often you learn more in those little casual conversations you have with people in unlikely places. You find out what the real score is and you want that to continue somehow. The University of East London, North-East London Poly, Polytechnic of East London, it's been so many things, and all those other courses, Newcastle, Sunderland, Sheffield, they've all played a part in introducing video. There have been some very interesting artists to come through education and go into these technologies. That is still going on.

JH: Were there particular contextual critical writings that you would agree with or disagree with?

TS: As an artist, I was too busy making the work to really have concrete opinions about things, which were still developing. Some artists did. Unfortunately there's not enough writing of that period to give a broad perspective. It does sound in some ways that it was focused on one thing but really there was quite a lot going on. Maybe there's an opportunity to see if there was anyone else writing or find out what other people were thinking at that time. It's one of the weaknesses perhaps for video that not a great many people were writing. But maybe one should try to read the artists' statements to get a broader sense, if they still exist. Or find out what people were really thinking individually and not as a group. I think that is very important. In the Film Co-op, there was very much a politicising of film. For some it worked, they wanted it to be part of that, while others debated it, but they didn't necessarily want to be part of it. They wanted more of an independent approach. Perhaps they hadn't really discovered yet

what they really wanted to do. Fitting to someone else's political agenda was not really what you'd expect as an artist, but you would consider it and debate it, but you wouldn't necessarily fit into it. In my opinion, this is something of the history of film and video that needs more revision because the perspective is not as broad as it should be, having been there and seen the range of work, and having talked to a number of artists who didn't actually agree with the stuff we now see or read from that period. In some ways what I felt was that there were artists who were looking at my work who weren't particularly interested in film and video. There were also curators looking at my work who weren't interested in the political aspect of it, or the politicising of video art, or film art but they gave me an open opportunity to work or to show work, which wasn't actually necessarily tied to this kind of writing. It'd be interesting to have a discussion about it with those who were writing and see if there's any revision in what we now have as documents of the period. I look at my own writing, I realise that at that time, it was very difficult to write in a very conscious political way. Some people found it much easier. Maybe that was built upon another generational thing, an earlier generation, where to break that tradition, or to introduce film and video within a painting and sculpture school, you had to write down your position of how to actually tackle it. I think that maybe there's a misreading of it. Maybe the people who wrote it didn't intend it to be that way, but I can see why people would not be able to accept it or find that they wouldn't want to work in that way.

JH: I think that's absolutely right. I think that your point about the academy having schools before, was obviously important, but arguing for these new areas of practice were really crucial to the continuation of it.

TS: Yes, but it seemed to be again, surprising, that you can get a really interesting artist and when you ask them what they were thinking about, they would write themselves into a box, as if that's the way artists work. You're sort of self-consciously creating history. I think history should not be used like this. I think one can reflect on it, but not feel limited or even feel that you need to fit into it. Film and video to me represented a freedom, and it did actually come at a time when there were all kinds of people working with it. People were coming from very different backgrounds, not just art colleges. In a way those who were coming from art colleges, were sometimes a little heavy-handed in my opinion, about what it should be. But, they also gave you something to react against. There was also what the purpose was in the first place, but it becomes rhetoric and often people would spend an awful lot of time worrying about it unnecessarily. The important thing was to go out and do it. Make the work and let the public or the audience decide what you were doing. I think that is more so now, or became more so, after that period. But I'm still thinking about it. I don't think the writing really reflects what people were thinking. Maybe they went along with it as people do, but when you look at the work, you can see other things, which were possibly more important. But this justification, this need to actually position oneself historically with something, is what I think created the problem. On one hand it did work, on another hand maybe it cut out an awful lot of people. I had first hand experience of it and it's still going on but, on the other hand I've followed another path, which is not necessarily being exclusive on my own. I've worked in collaboration with other artists, who wanted to do something other than what seemed to be the political thing. Video was part of film. It was part of the avant-garde. It was part of art history. I don't see it in isolation. It happened because artists questioned things. There's a whole history in the last 100 years of artists trying things out, exploring new media, and introducing things, which

are part of their time. So, as someone had said, video is part of contemporary art and should be seen equally. It's not in isolation from what else was going on at the time or what happened before.

JH: What ideas and other artist work influenced your work?

TS: There were people in England, Jeff Keen down in Brighton, who was very much a pioneer of film in the sixties. We worked together for a short period, but you realise that there were people drawing on a lot more things than just the visual arts. They were thinking outside of the conventions of the gallery. Those were the artists that interested me most. Obviously I'm very interested in other works of that period but I can't really say one person. We talked about debate, and I think the debate broadened one's idea about who was influencing or who was important or not or whatever. I just felt that if an artist was making interesting work, then that was enough, whoever they were. It was not one person it's how the whole picture works.

JH: You travelled quite a lot. You went to the United States obviously, you must have seen work on the West Coast? And then you went to Vienna and places like that.

TS: Yes, in the eighties. It was good. This is the thing when you travel somewhere you suddenly realise how much is going on that you are not aware of. Going to the West Coast, seeing their early history of film and video, it was interesting. I met a video artist there in the department. Video emerged in West Coast primarily out of performance art and that's very different from the way it perhaps it happened in New York. He was totally unaware of what was happening in England. I showed him stuff and it was a mutual discovery that there were other people tackling things, which hadn't been shown outside of San Francisco or London. James Burt and Sidney Peterson, a whole lot of early filmmakers, poets who'd set up a department and had been funded by an artist who'd been making money in the art world, but was bored with painting, set up a jazz group and it became a film department. And then going to Vienna there was Peter Weibel, Valie Export, Kurt Kren and seeing the art of that part of the world in the context of the political and Freud. The complexity of different artists and the shock of some of the work. But when you see it in context it suddenly makes sense. I'd come across obviously a lot of these works in the early seventies in London, but really didn't understand the context from which they were coming from. In travelling you broaden out your own perspective of where you're coming from yourself. I suppose the works I made in America reflected my attempt to settle into that culture and work with it. Not just to go from London and start making work there as if I wasn't part of something else. I've always been interested in the challenge of finding out about how I respond to different situations. That means cultures as well. Finding out what your limitations are, how you communicate, what seems to be the criteria or the priorities. I'm still doing that. In moving to Greece recently and working there, I'm up for something new. I think it's important to move. As much as I love England, it's not the only place. Contemporary art goes around the world. It's a constant journey or test really that you set yourself if you can. If you take two different polarities, Warhol and Snow, they actually open up something about film and camera, which I think fed into video and the way we approached it. The history of video is also part of film and the history of film is also part of video, so they are together somewhere. That's another history that needs to be addressed. Some artists would have a difficulty with that, but I don't. And there is also performance etc.

JH: Could you talk about your collaborations? You've talked a little bit about David Hall, but what about collaborations with other artists or performers, or technicians?

TS: The word collaboration is such a broad term really. David and I collaborated, but then when I think of all the people who collaborated with us – the technician from Goldhawk Road, the TV man, you draw in different kinds of collaboration. Housewatch was not a collaboration, it was more of a collective because although we agreed where we were going to show, we all went off and made our own work. Then we would come back and show it together.

JH: So how many people were in *Housewatch*?

TS: There were six. There was Ian Bourn, Chris White, Lulu Quinn, Alison Winckle, myself and then at other stages there was an artist called Stan Steele and then at the last show we had John Smith. But we also had other people working with us who helped us make these shows happen, curators, technicians, all kinds of people and support. People would say, 'We want Housewatch. Let's make this thing happen'. So it was always open to other people's thoughts about it. There was a composer called Steve Martland. Sometimes getting out of the studio or working with another group of artists can be good for you. You try out other ideas that maybe you wouldn't do if you were on your own. Things kind of grow out of these situations. I suppose this collaboration or the collective started for me, in Brighton in the sixties when I teamed up with Jeff Keen, Jim Duke and several other artists. We created 'happening' events. We never knew what we were going to do, we just turned up in a venue and made a piece of work. It often turned into chaos, but that was in the spirit of things. It was a learning curve for us all. We realised that you didn't have to have a coherent structure, you could actually go in and do something with film, performance, sound, etc and that event would become a work. I think that probably fed into my installation work, where I wouldn't make the work until I was in the gallery. It was a belief that you could pull it off. It gets harder but I still like that buzz of making the work in-situ or finding out what the work's going to be when you're setting it up. And going out with a camera with no particular idea and then the work coming out of whatever you shoot, whatever you start to look at.

JH: Were there any particular curators or facilitators?

TS: If I go back to the sixties, there was a group called The Combination, who were an alternative theatre group. They had a venue in West Street, right in the centre. As a group with Jeff Keen, we did a number of pieces there, which I thought were really good. Then the Scottish Arts Council was very good. They were always ahead in terms of giving us the venue or encouragement. There was a curator, who is still around, called Leslie Green. She was really supportive and a number of other individuals. Richard Demarco showed the films. ACME gallery, AIR Gallery, SPACE in London during the seventies were the places where you'd see a lot of video, a lot of performance, a lot of installation. They were key places that weren't part of the commercial gallery circuit but really were wonderful venues to work with because you could do what you wanted to do. I don't know any rich video artists at all. We have survived. We found ways to support ourselves through teaching etc. We all have mortgages or whatever. We are still here. But we know that it's quite difficult to sell

this stuff or make anything from it. In some way I like that it's free from that notion of what's it financially worth. Perhaps it would be great to know what's it worth. I could put a value on things, but whether it is worth that I don't know. It is interesting. I was thinking about that with *Behold* as an object. I asked a couple of curators what they thought of it and they were really interested. I said, 'What do you think it's worth then?' and they told me what they thought.

JH: What did they say?

TS: £12 000. They had a figure in their heads and I said, 'That sounds cheap!' I've often had a nightmare that I meet all of my students and they tell me 'Why did you teach me this' and 'Why did you encourage to go so far' because it is a bit of madness in a way art. It's crazy really when you think about it. What it represents and why we put so much energy into it. When you stand back from it, it could so easily vanish. In different era people would say 'What's the purpose of this?' One has had to answer that question a lot or try to. It still goes on. Maybe it's part of our culture to foster this belief in experimentation and to do things other than the material things that we know. It's a bit of a philosophy. I think people like the idea it's going on, but they don't necessarily understand it. You have to trust their culture and I suppose, continue with that belief. Uncertainty is part of the parcel of being a contemporary artist. There's no surety in it. You used to talk about what concerns you, but what it adds up to really, depends upon how it's received and people's conversation. It's from that dialogue really. Sometimes it would be easier to make certain things, which everyone says they understand or in a form or medium that everyone understands. 'Why did you do something that doesn't last or is so specific to its time?' But you loose sense of how you started and what set that off because you don't necessarily arrive anywhere where you say, 'Oh now I understand!' It's an ongoing process of re-evaluation of yourself, whether you want to be part of this scene or whether you want to do something other than that.