

JEREMY WELSH

Part 1

Jeremy Welsh might well seem the quintessential post-modern New Man. Paterfamilias, video artist, curator, theoretician, teacher and writer, he is one of the most energetic and influential figures in British video-art today.

After seven years as exhibition and distribution co-ordinator at LVA, he recently took on the video interests of the Arts Council's Film and Video Umbrella. His artistic output over the last ten years has been substantial, covering performance, installation and single monitor video works. The themes he deals with engage with post-modern theory as well as with social issues arising from late capitalism and urban decay. The medium itself and the monolith of broadcast television have always been of central concern to him, leading to post-modern mimicry of media overload with poetic protests weaving in and out of often sumptuously layered imagery.

If I could persuade Jez to focus on one issue, it would be that aspect of his artistic personality that produces moments of extreme sensitivity, those quiet reflections on the condition of masculinity that were so evident in his recent installation *Immemorial* at the Video Positive Festival in Liverpool. As I have already proposed in *IM 79/80*, the deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity is potentially the most radical way forward for sexual politics in art. Jeremy Welsh was more cautious as we spoke at length about this and other issues that his wide range of interests encompass. The first part of this interview deals directly with his work as an artist, while in next month's issue, Part II sets out his vision of the future, tackling post-modernism, technology and that thorny question: why British artists do so badly abroad.

Catherine Elwes: Can I ask you about your early work? *Insomnia* (1980) was the first tape of yours I saw.

Jeremy Welsh: It came out of a series of performances I did around 1975. They had very '70s titles, *Installation Action* numbers 1 to 5. They explored the relationship between the performer and the situation/context. Although they had a strong sculptural element, they were very much about process and action. They were almost always improvised within a loosely defined structure. By 1980, the works were becoming increasingly self-destructive

and very intense. They reached a point where they were positively dangerous, not just physically, but dangerous psychologically. I ceased to have any purchase on the original ideas for the works nor any control over what they had become. I had created a sort of monster. It had totally taken me over. I had to break it. The first stage of withdrawal involved not making any work for some time. The next stage was to find another context, another form to work with. Video seemed ideal because it allowed the performance aspect to continue but it gave me a distance from the work. I was able to look at it, change it, control it. *Insomnia* was the end of the old regime and the beginning of the new.

CE: What form did the new regime take?

JW: What interested me about video, was that it was an electronic recording medium that could pull together all the elements of sound, picture, music and action that I was working with creating a hybrid format. Early on, I had been involved in rock music, but I decided I wasn't interested in becoming part of the music business or dealing with the mass spectator sport aspect of that culture. But I was still interested in the processes of musical composition. Michael Nyman was an old friend and I had always been interested in his music. *In Re Don Giovanni* (1982) was a tongue-in-check pop promo for Nyman. At the time, he called his music 'theoretical pop music', so I called the tape 'theoretical pop video'.

CE: Tell me about *These Days Everyone's a Conceptualist* (1981).

JW: That was the first piece I made that was specifically about editing. The images were all found or constructed but not scripted in a conventional cinematic, televisual way. I made a series of tableaux produced in front of the camera. They were designed to create optical illusions, mechanically with rotating objects -mirrors, etc. These days you can do it with the touch of a button in an edit suite. The title of the piece came from an interview I heard on the radio with a pop musician who was

saying that in the 80's, musicians were Renaissance beings, essentially conceptualists dealing with the media as a kind of field. I was amused by this idea of us all being conceptualists, so the images in the tape were reconstructions of cliched ideas from '70s conceptual art to do with time and process etc.

CE: Did you have a clear view of your relationship to broadcast television at that stage? Was it an antagonistic one?

JW: No, it wasn't. I didn't share the antagonistic view that early video artists had in the '70s. I always found the media an interesting form although something to be suspicious of. The first major run-in I had with them was in 1977 when I had an exhibition that included a piece called *Physical Alphabet*. It was a series of photos of me posing as the letters of the alphabet. It got picked up by the Sunday Times who did a big banner headline 'Artist turns himself into the alphabet'. On the one hand, they were taking the typical dismissive attitude to contemporary artists, suggesting that I was basically a bit of a fool; but on the other hand, the piece was publicised in the paper and seen by millions of people.

CE: What about the relationship of your imagery to broadcast images? Your work always seemed to me to be about media saturation. The layering, the fracturing, the collage of different images constantly changing - like a metaphor of what you see in an evening's viewing. Was that a conscious critique?

JW: I was trying to address issues around the media and capitalism, being particular conscious of the political changes that were happening in the late '70s. Not just the emergence of Thatcher, but the decline of socialism under the last Labour government. I saw the way capitalism was replicating itself through media, marketing and consumerism. It was something I wanted to attack. The first way of attacking it was through very nihilistic anti-art, anti-culture, anti-everything performances. As the logic of that began to run out, I started to

look at other methods of addressing those issues. Collage was a technique I had used since I was a small child. I thought of the early multi-media performances as a form of collage in space and time. Then when I began to work with video, editing offered a system of electronic collage. I have always been interested in the deconstructive potential of found or reconstructed images. Collage or montage may seem the ultimate post-modern tool, but it was also a modernist strategy and goes back to the cubists.

CE: My worry with collage as a strategy, particularly as it appeared in scratch, was the problem or re-assimilation by the media, by television itself. TV began to mimic it. It became a fashion, a style. Now youth programmes use odd camera angles, soft shots, emphasising the presence of the camera the way artists did in the '70s as a critique of the realism employed by broadcast TV.

JW: Scratch had a particular dynamic which made it easier for it to be assimilated in that way. But I don't think it's inherent to the form. It's happening to everything else now as well. The entire history of the world is open season for the media to re-appropriate and repossess.

CE: Some time ago, David Ross wrote that the only position left for the artist to occupy within television was the personal, to make a personal statement as a challenge to the pervasiveness of the corporate voice. Your installation *Immemorial* in Liverpool seemed very personal in that it was to do with you and your family history, the continuity of your father, yourself and now your son. Does this mark a shift towards the use of more personal material?

JW: I had wanted to do something about my father since he died in 1986. Dealing with his death was difficult because of being male, and the way males are expected to behave in society. My mother was still alive. I was somehow supposed to be her son and at the same time partly take on the role my father had previously occupied which I found a strange and complicated idea to deal with. I wanted to make a piece around how I felt about my father, what I knew about him and a lot of things I would never have been able to say to him, or to anybody else while he was alive. The birth of my son made it gel, made it possible to think about. I realised that I was just another transitional part of human history. Here was another face coming along. It's strange that I felt this more acutely with his birth than with his sister's. I don't know if it was purely because he was a male child or whether it was a combination of factors. Alice was born when I had a full complement of parents and some surviving grandparents.



But Laurie came along when I was the oldest male member of the stock. So, yes, at one level, the piece was an attempt to deal with more personal things. But using old family documentation made me think about post-modern arguments around representation and the nature of the image. I didn't find it necessary to foreground these arguments, but they were very much there in the structuring or ghostly remains of things that had very little to do with the reality of human beings, of human consciousness.

CE: But they remain a reality insofar as you remember the people they represent?

JW: Yes, and the memory of the person is more real than the image. The image is an abstraction of the memory of the person.

CE: I've observed that it's more difficult for men to make work based on personal material than it would be for, say, a feminist.

JW: Yes, it's almost not allowed. When I had just finished editing *Immemorial*, I showed the single-channel version at a college where I was teaching. I got some strange reactions. One male tutor who had recently had a child really related to it, but other male tutors were quite hostile. They

considered it beneath a man's dignity to expose these sorts of things through his work.

CE: Do you think it's easier to make a piece like that now than ten or fifteen years ago? We are supposed to be in the age of the New Man. For instance, it's more acceptable for men to participate in the care of their children.

JW: I know what you are saying, but I think the New Man thing is largely a myth although a lot of men have shifted their consciousness entirely due to the thinking and influence of women. But much of the image of the New Man is hype, as is the New Woman created by the media. It's more to do with personal success and materialistic self-fulfillment rather than a radical re-thinking of gender roles... Current systems of taxation and benefits are designed to perpetuate traditional family structures and working patterns. Things seem to have got worse in this respect... The changes are mostly cosmetic.

Catherine Elwes

... to be continued.