



REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70's & 80's Interview with Anna Ridley

Interview by Dr Jackie Hatfield, 14th June 2005

JH: Which of the key works that you've produced do you consider to be the most important or the most seminal and why?

AR: My business is with television, my background is as a designer working in television with the BBC starting in the late sixties. Coincidentally, I had been closely associated with artists and one artist in particular. I was inspired by what was happening in the sixties and for me there was a direct line to the happenings coming from the Dadaists and the Futurists through to Black Mountain College in the US. They manifested themselves on the streets of the UK, particularly in London. What I was really excited about was that artists took to the streets. They were rejecting the idea of being confined within a gallery space and that the work just becoming another form of currency; in other words that people would buy it, on the whole, for investment purposes rather than to appreciate and understand the work. Alongside this the artists really wanted to get directly to the public that they wanted to reach. So, for me I was particularly interested in how to bring artists' work into the public arena. Because I was working in television, it seemed to me the perfect platform because it comes into everybody's front room. I was involved with one artist in particular to begin with, *David Hall* who was a sculptor. He became, in the late sixties interested in using photography as a medium and then took up film. I guess, that I became his assistant. I wasn't at that time sufficiently experienced and skilful technically, but there were various things that I could do. I helped him make a number of films and later on video works. Also in the late sixties a group of artists emerged and formed something called *Artist Placement Group* and *David Hall* was part of that along with *John Latham*, *Stuart Brisley* and *Jeffrey Shaw*. One mustn't forget of course the redoubtable *Barbara Stevini* who later became the forward thrust of the organisation. Basically its philosophy was placing people within organisations, whether it was industry or a government department. So for me, it was an extension of putting the artists where the people were and not operating within some, as they used to say, 'elite context'. Out of that a phase emerged called, 'Context is half of the work'. *Barbara Stevini* coined that phrase. That was very important when considering putting works on television. Luckily for me, in the early 80s Channel 4 emerged. Prior to that, in 1976, because this new medium of video had been taken up by a number of artists and a whole body of work was emerging and at the time the BBC ran an art series called *Arena*, I persuaded the then editor *Mark Kidel* to devote a whole programme to video art. At that time I produced, with *David Hall*, a piece called *This Is a Television Receiver*, which prefaced without announcement, the whole programme on *Arena*. Although I tried to persuade the BBC to do more of this kind of work, because it seemed to be the obvious place, in the end I had to leave in order to realise my ambition of bringing artists into the arena of television. So when Channel 4 emerged that was the starting point. The Chief Executive of the time, *Jeremy Isaacs*, was a very unusual individual. He stated that he wanted programmes 'like no other' and I felt that this was my cue.



JH: What about the production and negotiations for the production and dissemination of the works that you had in mind?

AR: It seemed very important to negotiate certain principles. First of all I was very fortunate in finding a commissioning editor called *Paul Madden* who was at Channel 4 at the time. When I started to outline what I had in mind he didn't bat an eyelid. I was quite surprised about that. The terms and conditions were that the artist could decide whether they wanted to make a series or a one-off and they could say how long the duration of these pieces should be. They should be given a budget that would allow them access to all the technical facilities that any programme maker would have and that the content would be for them to decide, which was highly unusual because with my background in the BBC interference was something that one was only too familiar with. I was amazed when he actually said, 'Well, yes. That sounds like a good idea.' Having met problems before when trying to achieve this within the BBC, I nearly fell off my chair. He was quite sensible in suggesting that instead of taking on all of the artists that I had in mind to begin with, that we should start with one artist and we would do what's known in the trade as 'a pilot'. That artist was *Ian Breakwell*. We made an initial number of works and from that, I drew up the ideas that came from all the other artists. Fortunately Ian's pilot was successful, so we got the go-ahead for the whole series. When I say 'series', three people opted to make a series themselves and the rest opted to make one-offs.

David Cunningham made a series of 5, *John Latham* series of 6, and *Ian Breakwell*, amazingly, initially a series of 21. These were *Ian Breakwell's Continuous Diary*. Then later on he was commissioned to make a further 8, which was *Ian Breakwell's Christmas Diary*.

AR: I had been mixed up with artists for a very long time, and in fact my career had really run along two parallel lines with one foot in the TV industry and the other foot within the community of artists. I had met Ian earlier through APG because he was one of the artists to have a placement. So I met him that way and other the artists I think I met along the way at various stages. I thought it was important not just to bring in people who had experience with filmmaking or using video as a medium but people who hadn't done that at all, to see what would happen when they got the opportunity to make work for television. Obviously by this time, we are talking about the early 80s, my own skills and experience in the techniques of programme making had expanded enormously from when I first joined the BBC. So, I was able to collaborate and help each of the artists to a greater or lesser extend depending on the help that they might need technically to realise their projects.

The other important part about that side of it was that these works should go out in their own behest, they were not to be part of another programme. They weren't to be commented on, that they should just appear as themselves. In that way, I felt that they would not be mediated, which I think television does all the time. It was disappointing for me then to see other producers packaging artists work into a 'wacky' half hour. I felt that one piece could resonate on another. For me you need a kind of 'think space.' For an artist's work to appear amongst regular programming, it was so different that it stood out and it could just be itself.

The thing about TV is that you rely on feedback from the audience. We did get some letters and some people ring up what's known as 'The Duty Office', so we were given

feedback that way. Ian's series of 21 became a regular feature because it was programmed over successive weeks. It wasn't like it was just popping up one a week, it was during the week. Ian started to get a regular audience, so there were some very fascinating comments at the time. I suppose one would have welcomed more critical debate from both television commentators and critics as well as people from the art milieu, but I don't think from the arts community there was really anybody who volunteered to comment on it. We didn't really get a lot of feedback, but in a way we were more cheered by the response we got from the audience because at the end of the day those are the important people.

JH: Coming to community and context, there were blurred edges with these questions. You have discussed the Futurists and the wider historical context for the philosophies that you were interested in, but what about contemporary artists or contemporary ideas? Was it really focused around the APG?

AR: That was an initial inspiration but because video emerged at the end of the sixties and the early seventies outside of broadcast television, and although it was an extremely low technology by comparison with the broadcast industry, in effect that actually made it a really new medium. It was a blank canvas. I had wanted to go into television in the first place because it was such an important means of communication in everybody's lives and was becoming more and more dominant. I was intrigued not just by the design process, which was what my starting point was, but also by the decisions that were made by producers, directors and editors. So I became involved in all very different genres of programmes from arts and music, to drama, to entertainment, to current affairs. I was interested to learn the whole panoply of means and decision-making process. I thought, because artists were people who stood outside of social organisations, in order to come back to comment not just in an objective way but to come in from a totally different angle, that they were not restricted by any hierarchical or organisational structures. In that way they can help us see ways of understanding and seeing in terms of how we live and operate in the society we find ourselves in. I thought that that was extremely important part of it. One of the things video does that film can not, is be live. It can be relayed immediately. No other medium could do that and it was very exciting. I did work on a lot of live programmes. I didn't work with any of the artists who wanted to make live works because it is quite a scary thing to do.

The other interesting thing was that within fine art there had not been a set up to enable filmmakers or video makers or people using sound, for that matter, to study or start to develop their work. In 1971 *David Hall* did set up 'Film, Video and Sound' within Fine Art at Maidstone College of Art where he previously was teaching Sculpture.

A head of steam was building up for this work. One of the most exciting manifestations was in 1975 with the *Video Show* at the Serpentine Gallery in London. I was involved in that in a number of ways, but I did help to set up the installations by designing bits and pieces to make it possible for a free flow of people walking through, because, everything was crammed into that space. Not only that but it spilled out into the park itself to the extent where *David Hall's* and *Tony Sinden's 101 TV Sets* was actually housed in a tent.

I think the most amusing day was on Cup Final day. *101 TV Sets* was basically a number of TV sets of dubious technical prowess. They ranged from very sharp crystal clear images to the most fuzzy ones you can imagine. The sound similarly ranged from

positively squawky to something quite modulated and all shades in between. The amazing thing was on Cup Final day because all these TV sets were tuned in to broadcast television. Obviously it was making a point about broadcast television, but we had a huge audience who came in to watch the Cup Final. It was interesting to see how many people would watch pictures of such appalling definition. I have to say that going into some people's houses, even today, their TV sets are really so badly tuned in that I am amazed. People can have orange faces or they are bright green, and people will happily watch it. Now with wide screen you'll see people you are very familiar with, who have suddenly got incredibly fat because they used to be in 4:3 ratio. Now they've been stretched out for wide screen because people haven't selected the right aspect ratio. For a professional who spends so much time getting something absolutely perfect, this is a very salutary experience.

JH: Can you describe chronologically, the series that you produced?

AR: 1982 was when I approached *Paul Madden* and he suggested doing a feasibility, by making a pilot with *Ian Breakwell*. That went well so we started, in earnest, producing in 1984. The pieces were mainly broadcast in 1985. Ian's had gone out in 1984 and later on he did a Christmas series, which was in addition to what had already been negotiated. Obviously there was quite an amount of hours overall within the series, so it was spread out over several months. But, they were reasonably close together so, as in TV speak, we wanted to flag up that something new, something different was happening over this period of time. Later on Ian was invited to make another series by yet another commissioning editor within Channel 4 called *David Benedictus*. That was his series called *Public Face: Private Eye*. That was a series of five. Only, it was completely new because his previous series had drawn upon Ian's diaries. This was completely original work. It was very exciting to do.

I produced *Public Face Private Eye* with Ian, so it was the old team back together. That was in 1988 and eventually it was broadcast in 1989. By that time the commissioning editors had changed. This was always happening and was quite frustrating. So, it came under the aegis of *Waldemar Januszczak* who had taken over as commissioning editor for the arts. But one piece of good fortune was that a man I'd worked with previously at the BBC, *Mike Bolland*, who had joined Channel 4 when it first started, had commissioned the art series that *After Image* produced. There were a number of series of really interesting stuff with artists and designers and writers. There was a whole range of people. It had been very successful. He went up in the echelons of Channel 4 so by the time 1990 was approaching, when Glasgow was to be Europe's cultural capital, he was Head of Arts and Entertainment. I had a good relationship with him over the years and I felt that I could approach him with the idea of doing, *19:4:90* a series of TV interventions that was inspired initially by *David Hall's TV Interruptions* of 1971.

AR: Well, things had started to tighten up somewhat in Channel 4 and its initial brave approach of allowing much more freedom, inevitably, couldn't go on forever. TV schedulers don't like messiness, particularly when they have to slot in advertisements. Not only that but also trailers for their own programmes. They need to know where they are and what they are doing, so this restriction of four minutes came up to satisfy those conditions.

However there was one exception and that was *David Mach* who made a piece about snooker, rather amazingly, and because of the nature of his piece it in fact expanded to four sections of four minutes. I produced that with David. Interestingly the two protagonists were Stephen Hendry who was the Scottish champion and Ray Reardon, who had been a reigning snooker champion for many years. Those were the two protagonists in *David Mach's* piece. When the piece was scheduled, it went out when the BBC was running the real snooker championships, so effectively Stephen Hendry was playing on both BBC 1 and Channel 4 simultaneously. We had some interesting feedback from that one. Later on, I produced with *David Hall, TV Interventions '93*. That was commissioned by MTV and *Peter Docherty* was the commissioning editor there. He had made a policy of inviting artists and designers to do things for MTV and he'd seen a retrospective of David's work. He invited David to do some one-minute pieces. I produced those with David. After that, I had work with artists making documentaries and I had done other different kinds of TV work as well. But then I went back into business with *Ian Breakwell* to produce *Auditorium*, which was an interactive installation live event but recorded. Then finally, most recently, a piece called *The Other Side*, which was an installation commissioned by the *De La Warr Pavilion* in Bexhill-on-Sea where it was set-up for its premiere.

JH: What was the international context for the works that you were producing?

AR: What I was trying to bring about on broadcast television was very important to get direct to the public. Broadcast television provided the perfect means for doing so. There was in Europe, one other person who had been doing similar things before me, *Gerry Schum*. He sadly died, but his work obviously stands as a testament to his philosophy of trying to get artists onto broadcast TV. In the United States there were some excellent series run by WGBH in Boston and one or two other cable networks but they were cable, they were not broadcast. I think for me that was actually very important because the cable networks were more niche or narrow casting, as opposed to broadcasting. Although things have changed considerably in the UK since I was putting out the artists' works, there was at that time a shared experience. Now it's very, very different.

JH: There's a difference between broadcasting and narrowcasting. Broadcasting is literally in the street and narrowcasting in the space somewhere behind, in an alley.

Did you have any particular ideological reasons why you chose to work with artists in the first place?

AR: There are some very gifted programme makers who I have come across and have been very important. I would certainly single out *Ken Loach* who isn't an artist in quite the same way, but as anyone who is familiar with his work will know that he is fuelled by very passionately held convictions. When I was a student I saw *Cathy Come Home*. My flatmate and I were so moved by this, and because it was about homeless people, we went out on the streets of Surbiton, where we were living, looking for homeless people to bring back to our flat to look after. Sadly being Surbiton we didn't find any at that time. Quite possibly we'd find a few now. He was a big influence on me. At its best, what television can do is not just move people but move people to action. The screening of *Cathy Come Home* caused Shelter, the charity, to be set up and to me, that really underlined not just the power that television has, but the staying power that

television has. So I saw not all artists, because not all artists are passionately committed in the same way and wouldn't want to work in that way, but those that were, I could see could be a force to be reckoned with. I think, looking at the state of TV today, we desperately need more of it because we need to be challenged. And television, although the Reithian concept of informing, educating and entertaining has largely survived it's not doing it anymore. For me, artists, in all their variety, would find different things to say in different ways than one would get from programme makers in general. Obviously I reserve saying that about individual programme makers in particular or filmmakers like *Ken Loach*.

JH: Were there any other ideological reasons or philosophical reasons, for getting involved with artists with the televisual, and artists using electronic?

AR: The other aspect was, not so much ideological in the pure sense. I could see the potential of what you could do with videotape and electronically. From my point of view, the way I liked to work, it was possible to experiment before you committed yourself. Had one been trying to do the equivalent in film, although it might not have been the right route to go, there were things that you could do very easily by using video and the electronic medium, which just weren't possible with film. This allowed experimentation to be achieved quite economically, and from an artist point of view that was very, very attractive. I particularly enjoyed editing. I used to work with the artist to do the preliminary offline editing, as it was in those days, before those systems were available on computer. That was another excellent reason for using that medium.

JH: Did funding stifle or enable you to realise your ambitions?

AR: Having worked alongside artists before I embarked on my own projects, it seemed to me that funding was actually quite difficult to achieve. Going through funding bodies like the Arts Council and the British Film Institute for that matter could give seed money. It was really rare for those bodies to match what a network television company could offer. Artists that I know, some did quite well in receiving initial funding, others were somewhat thwarted. It seems that sometimes your face will not fit, so there are pitfalls to applying for money in that kind of way. At least with a commissioning editor there is discussion about it. Hopefully you are told why a certain project is not going to go forward and maybe you can improve on it. But as far as I can see with funding bodies it's often the case that you make a written submission, there's no discussion and you just get either an acceptance or a refusal. I suppose I was very fortunate with what I did with Channel 4, inasmuch as my commissioning editor was very enlightened.

JH: Did you achieve your ambitions with dissemination?

AR: Certainly I achieved what I set out to do initially. My frustration and I suppose disappointment, although I suppose I shouldn't be surprised really, is that along the way television has changed. It's still perfectly possible for artists to be given the opportunities that I negotiated for them, but people are less willing to take the risk. The television executives that I knew came from that sort of pioneering spirit. They were willing to give things a chance. Because of the advent of the Internet, so many more channels, cable, satellite, digital, TV executives are very nervous. They know that things are changing but are not quite sure what is going to change. So sadly, they are

not willing to take the risks. I think the opposite; I think they did have to take the risks because a TV channel has to have a personality. That is what Channel 4 gained in the first instance. There's not much to choose between Channel 4 and Channel 5, whereas the BBC is opening up its digital channels and making distinct personalities for them. I think that artists could assist in this. As far as I am concerned they should make the airwaves sizzle.

JH: With the conceptual context, because the broadcast particularly for works by *David Hall* for example, conceptually that moment happened once the work was broadcast. I would say that putting it in another context, wouldn't necessarily work the same. How could you put the *Tap Piece* in the gallery? One wonders how that could possibly work because it is like a performance, it's been and gone. The moment passed in 1971.

AR: Ironically you should choose the *Tap Piece* because that's very much connected to the idea of the television receiver as being an object, a box. I have seen people screen that on a large screen and of course it's absolutely wrong. It becomes something else completely once you do that. The other piece, although it wasn't for broadcast, was a piece called *This is a Video Monitor*. It goes: '...which is a box, the shell is of wood, metal and plastic and on one side, most likely the one you are looking at has a curved glass surface...' You couldn't show that on a computer because it's actually describing the object again, so there are problems obviously with that. When an updated version of that was translated into *This is a Television Receiver*, for the BBC Arena programme, then it had to be remade. In this case another element was added which was the newsreader *Richard Baker* who was a very prominent newsreader at the time. For those who are not familiar with the conditions that the BBC will put on their newsreaders, I should say that they are not allowed to do all sorts of things. They are not allowed to make commercials and they are restricted in the kinds of programmes that they can work on. It was actually quite a coup to get *Richard Baker* to perform in this particular piece. Again, *This is a Television Receiver* is a box. It's the same sort of description and project. As a projection it simply doesn't work.



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