



REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s Interview with George Snow

Interview by Professor Stephen Partridge, 4th September 2007

- SP:** Which of your works do you think are really important to you, even if they are not necessarily, more widely acknowledged?
- GS:** I think the most important work I ever did was *The Assignment*, which I did in 1988 with funds I got from Channel 4 and John Wyver's Illuminations. That was important to me because I had this notion at the time of telling drama in an electronic kind of way. I wanted to use that new technology to tell a story. I wanted to bring in pieces of computer graphics, as simple as they were in those days, and combine them with real actors and actresses doing their business. I think it worked very well and it certainly got a lot of acclaim at the time, but the problem was, it didn't really go anywhere after that. There weren't the opportunities to do drama on TV and there weren't the opportunities to experiment with electronic media. I really do think that there are bags more room in there for that kind of media to develop. It's just that in my case, it just hasn't developed since 1988, not since *The Assignment*.
- SP:** The reason nobody did that was probably because there was a lot of excitement about that form on TV. I know that John Wyver was very keen to move video art out of what he considered to be a ghetto in festivals and move it into television itself. He sought to get rid of that distinguishing. A lot of us thought that TV was an angle, but the problem with TV seemed to be that it was all consuming. Art is nothing special. I'm not saying it should be, but in that context that's how it was seen. Having said that though, Channel 4 put *Designation* out. Is that right?
- GS:** Yes, Channel 4 put it out. They put it on at about 12:30 at night after some programme on ladies discussing some esoteric notions about mothers sucking their baby boys' penises. I am not joking. It was probably the most tedious programme I ever saw in my life. For some reason, Channel 4 thought it better to put John Wyver's material on really, really late at night. I remember John having a lot of problems with that. We all did actually. No one would stay up to watch our stuff.
- SP:** Did that happen with the Ghosts in the Machine label, when Michael Grade famously said, "I want that rubbish off my Channel"?
- GS:** It went out as part of Ghosts in the Machine, yes. That is probably why we were put on after the ladies sucking their son's penises.
- SP:** What about some of the earlier work from that period?
- GS:** I hadn't look at my early work for 10 or more years, until recently when I bought myself a little Canopus box, which I can plug my old U-matic tapes into, and it squirts them out onto

my computer. It was fantastic fun to look at all my old work. There were a couple of early videos, including one that I did with Robert Ellis. He was a friend of mine living in the house. He was a strange fellow who wrote and drew extremely well. That was my first movie. Then I did another movie called *George Snow's Love Video*. By that stage I'd seen work by George Barber and all of the other scratch video artists. I thought "Yeah, that's a good angle." So, I went round and I got my favourite snippets of scenes from lots of movies, such as Armando Rivoli in *The White Sheik* swinging backwards and forwards on a giant swing. I love that section. A little girl appears and looks up at him in the trees and exclaims, "Lo Sceicco bianco!" It's fabulous to see. Another great scene that I use in *Love Video* was the dance scene that Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner do in *The King and I*, which I think is one of the most thrilling moments cinematically. Then I used lots of other love pieces from movies that I particularly liked. I got a little bit out of *Roseland*, which is a movie about ballroom dancing in Roseland, New York. I took snippets out of that. It was complete piracy, but no one has ever complained and I haven't had any letters from lawyers about it, so I assumed it was ok. In the name of art, it's ok.

SP: How was that piece shown, and how was it distributed?

GS: I don't think it was ever shown anywhere, actually. I don't think it even made it to the World Wide Video Festival in The Hague. It's one of those obscure little pieces, but it is still a favourite of mine.

SP: What about the work you made with Robert Ellis?

GS: Again that's never been shown. That was my first ever work. It was made on Beta Max. I had two Beta Max machines. You would press, 'pause-record' on one and 'play' on the other. The piece was called, *I was Wearing a Gold Dress*, which was the title of one of Robert's pieces. I came across an image of Robert Ellis in a magazine called, Varoom. It was on the front cover for something that we did called Radical Illustration. At the same time as I was thinking about video work, I was involved with the Radical Illustrators. Robert made the front cover. I guess the work was made in about 1985. It might have been earlier. I loose track. It could have been 1984 or it could have been 1983. But, it was in that sort of era.

SP: What led you into making videos? At that time you were quite an accomplished designer.

GS: There were two things really. I had run out of steam with illustration and design. I just didn't have any inspiration left. It's the story of my life. I do these kinds of things. I do them with enthusiasm and then I get disappointed that it's not really going anywhere. So, I leave it and move on to something else. I left illustration although I had had some success and I was very pleased with all my success. But, my wife bought me, at my request, a Sinclair Spectrum computer for Christmas 1981, and that was really the nail in the coffin for illustration. As soon as I discovered that machine and as soon as I had learned a line of BASIC, I was able to write a programme. I just became obsessed with computers. Within about a month of getting the Sinclair Spectrum, I'd gone to the bank and asked then for a loan of something outrageous like £4000, to buy my first IBM PC. I programmed that

for a short while. Then, I heard about this wonderful box called a Pluto. A Pluto ran on the same Intel 8088 as my PC, only this chip had one task, and that was to convert video into 8-bit colour. So, I got the Pluto. I figured out how to connect it up and how to synch it and I started writing a programme in code in BASIC for the Pluto. I wrote this amazing programme to take the video image in black-and-white and colourise it in virtually real time. There had to be a delay of one frame. And this chip, this Intel 88 chip, from circa early 80's, could process video in real time and colourise it. I wrote some routines. I spent two or more years programming the computer until I got a notion of what it could do. I was extremely proud of myself but the problem was nobody could really understand what it was I was doing, apart from other programmers. They are pretty few and far between and not very important people anyway. You know you have written a line of code, and it's very elegant. It's very beautiful and nicely written and it does the job perfectly, but how do you say that to somebody? So, I just looked at video and thought, "Well that's interesting. Let me see what happens." At this time I'd heard that White City Dog Stadium was going to be pulled down. So, I took the opportunity to get my portable U-matic out, go to White City Dog Stadium and record one of the last races there. I then took it back home and processed it via the Pluto graphics board. My dad took me to the dogs when I was very young. I remember the dogs. They had a wonderful atmosphere. It wasn't like horse racing. Horse racing was really for the 'knobs', but dog racing was for the workingman. It was wonderfully seedy and scuzzy. I thought it was magic. So, my first proper work, one where I'd really considered the edits very carefully, was *Dogs*. That went through the Pluto graphics card and when it came out, it looked superb. That was in 1984. I was dead pleased with *Dogs*. I still am dead pleased with *Dogs*. Then, one day this fellow called Brendan Beal wondered into my studio. I have no idea where Brendan came from or how he got my name or my number, but Brendan Beal was, at that time, a young, up and coming musician. He'd written a song called *Shuttle Disaster*, based on the shuttle disaster of 1986. It was not long after the disaster happened, and he came into my studio with this piece of cut-up music with pieces from the BBC news "Giant Step for Mankind" routines and Regan saying "This is a big disaster" and all the voice communications between the shuttle and the ground stations in the minutes before it blew up. It made a fantastic song. I was totally inspired by it. I liked to record lots of stuff off the BBC, and I had already recorded images from the disaster, just out of interest really. Then I decided I needed some more live footage. So, I went to the American Embassy and said, "have you got the footage of your spaceship blowing up?" and they said, "No!" So, I thought I'd go to the Russian Embassy. I went along and I spoke to a very nice man in Sovexport Film, called Mr. Pluschenko. I explained to him what I was doing and Mr. Pluschenko gave me an armful of 16mm film of Soviet achievements in space. I thought "fantastic" and took it all away. It's amazing that they trusted me with all of this valuable 16mm film. I took it along to a tele-cine place in town, got it transferred, and came away with two or three U-matics full of this material. Then I went on to make *Shuttle Disaster*, which was in praise of Soviet achievements in space and damnation on the Americans.

SP: When you talk about going to the tele-cine place, it's like the tip of an iceberg, because it hints at the way you were quite well networked because of your experience commercially as an illustrator. You were networked in ways that maybe other artists weren't.

- GS:** Yes, I guess so. But, you must remember that things at tele-cine were a little bit strange to me in those days. I didn't really know what it was. All I knew was that if I went along to this place they could convert the 16mm film into a videotape that I could use. But it's strange. You talk about networks, yet they were completely separate existences on my part. All the people that I knew as illustrators remained illustrators and that was one circle. All my friends I made from the video era, they are a group of friends and they stick within their own circle. Nobody really crosses over very much.
- SP:** Except you.
- GS:** Yes, but just out of curiosity and interest. On that note, and this is slightly ahead in the story, but after I tired of video making and I found myself repeating myself and not really doing anything new and fresh, I moved into 3D animation. Then I got obsessed with that for donkey's years, until I got bored. Now, I am into music. So, I imagine I will be doing that for the next 5 years until I get disappointed and move on to something like brain surgery.
- SP:** Your early video works were followed quite quickly by your interactions with computing, which of course was a portent for what was to come. I remember getting a Spectrum myself, and then getting Pluto and thinking "This is the way". It was because it had the power to have a synthesised reality through the video signal, which to me certainly meant 'art'. It wasn't just about the camera. It was about what you could do in processing. That was portent for the digital age, which was about to happen but hadn't. But, it was pretty hard, in those early days, to squeeze things out.
- GS:** What was fascinating for all of us, surely must have been that we had come from a background of drawing and painting and conventional art schools. We had a sense of history of art and we knew that everyone, from Michelangelo to Rembrandt, to any of the Impressionists to the 20th century, they all processed their work in some way or another. The Impressionists were often using photographs as the basis for their painting and certainly they processed. They had all those theories of exchanging colour for tone and this that and the other. Then, 20th century artists had a myriad of processes. Cubism is obvious process of an image. I think we just came from that continuum. We just took that idea. You get reality and you mess around with it and you make something else out of it that maybe, brings you closer to the essence of the subject matter that you are dealing with.
- SP:** I think it is a very good way of putting it actually. How did you fund your work in the 80's?
- GS:** I was very lucky. My wife worked. She had a job at Honey and she worked for Next in the Summer. I didn't really have to work that hard to make money. So really it was down to Catherine having funded me over those years.
- SP:** She was quite an established illustrator in her own right.

GS: She was earning £30,000 a year from illustration, the same amount again from Honey and ten or twenty thousand pounds from Next, who she used to design the catalogue for. So, I didn't have to work. That's the way it should be really.

SP: Nevertheless, you did get pockets support from various sources.

GS: Yes, the pockets of support came after *Shuttle Disaster*. Somebody suggested, it was probably George Barber, that I should go along to the BFI and ask them for some money. So, I went to the BFI and asked if I could have some money to make a film. I had called it then, *Muybridge in Fulham*, because I wanted to bring Muybridge into the place in London that I lived and basically, I asked for one and a half thousand pounds. It was pretty good money in 1985. So, I made *Muybridge in Fulham*. By bringing those Muybridge characters back to life, I did my first animation then. That was actually a very exciting process. Lots of people have re-animated Muybridge but I did it as skilfully as I possibly could. The problem with Muybridge is that they don't line up correctly. He had 12 cameras in a cubical arrangement, so as the person went walking past the cameras, he arranged to have them triggered in sequence, but each one catches a slightly different viewpoint of that figure. However, if you are really, really careful and you line up those little background grids, which never really line up, you can actually get the person almost back to how they were. It's fascinating that these people who died at the end of the 19th century, are suddenly coming back and walking in these little never-ending loops.

SP: And the animals as well. You had an interest in dogs, and I remember you talking about the famous dog cosmonaut, Laika. Did that come to anything?

GS: Oddly enough it did come to something in the end. I did a statue of Yuri Gagarin and Laika, while I was living here in Italy in 1997. I did a statue for a chap called Felix Dennis who had a Garden of Heroes. He asked me to do a sculpture and I suggested to him that I could do Yuri Gagarin and Laika, like a space man having a walk with a space dog. The idea was they'd be set in the English countryside. I've always been a big fan of like Soviets and Soviet art and I always wanted to do a heroic statue.

SP: Going back to support that you received, did John Wyver commission the work Channel 4?

GS: They commissioned the work. I think I got £20,000 for *The Assignment*. We did two versions. I did something called *The Man of the Crowd* to start off with and that was my favourite project. I did *The Man of the Crowd* in the same way. It was a drama, which I dealt with in the same way that I would deal with all dramas. That is, get a bunch of my mates and get them to act up the various parts. So I did that. I made it as a pilot for Channel 4's *Ghost in the Machine* series. I don't know how many people were given money for pilots but quite a few people got something like £5,000 to make a pilot. I made the pilot and was very, very pleased with it. John Wyver and Channel 4 were also pleased and they said, "Can you now go ahead and make this? Here is £20,000 more." But, and there was a big "but", they said, "You can't use the same people. You've got to use equity actors and actresses." I didn't really want to do that, so I told them I don't want to do it. But, then I asked if I could do a whole other project. I asked if I could do *The Assignment*,

and I would use some equity actors and actresses. They said, "Yes, go ahead and do that". So I made *The Assignment*. I enjoyed making it immensely because I got a trip to Venice out of it.

SP: Can you recall any critical reaction for your work? Was there much?

GS: *The Assignment* was very well received and it won a prize in the Tokyo Video Festival. Whenever I went to see it in various festivals, people always clapped and they clapped really loudly. It wasn't just a clap. It was a loud clap. It never won any kind of competitions, but it was always in amongst the top bunch. I got lots and lots of positive reactions in that way. Oddly enough though, I was looking at myself on the web and I came across some horrible little Australian who was criticising my work for the 1987 Melbourne Video Festival. He was talking about *Dogs*; "I can't understand why they are playing pipeline when these dogs come racing out". It was really toffee nosed, nose-in-the-air reaction. I thought, "If I ever see that guy, I'm going to bash him round the lug holes because he doesn't understand." The dogs racing in the *Dogs* were totally elegant. They were absolutely beautiful and if he couldn't see that, he shouldn't be damn well criticizing video. I assume it's a he, but he, or even she, will get a box around the ears if I ever find them.

SP: For many years, you were part of the festival scene. You were going to festivals and putting work in. Can you talk a little bit about that and The World Wide Video Festival?

GS: All of that was grand. I really liked The World Wide Video Festival, or for that matter, any of the festivals. Montbeliard in France was another good festival. What was so great about them was that you got to meet all of these other British video makers, and we were all released from Britain. This was only 10 years ago, but we were a quite straight-laced society. So, as soon as you get to take us out of our conservative English environment, we are all madly drinking and completely going to town. We are being completely over the top. So, that was a week at the video festival. Then, we would go back home and just become normal, proper serious artists once again. But, the festivals were great because you met so many people and you actually got a chance to meet your neighbours. I met you (Stephen Partridge) there for the first time and lots of other London based video artists who I had actually not met before, and there they all were at The World Video Festival in The Hague.

SP: It was a chance to people from abroad as well.

GS: Yes it was. It was great to meet people from abroad. I met people like Maria Vedder, who I've lost touch with now. I'd like to see her again. She was always a good laugh. There were several other people I met as well.

SP: You tended to work quite independently and almost hermitically, apart from collaborating with people like musicians and so on. It is interesting because some of the people we talked to were very much embedded in groups such as London Video Arts or the Filmmakers' Co-op. You weren't really a clubbable person?

- GS:** No. I suppose I've always been like that. I remember my days at Hornsey College of Art when I was a young rebel. I didn't really mix very much with the socialist society. I tended to have my own opinion. So, I'd do my own propaganda. I've just always been very shy is the truth. I am just a shy fellow.
- SP:** But nevertheless it was not total isolation because you worked with Illuminations. You can't be totally on your own. There has to be some sort of network.
- GS:** Although, these days I think I do have to do it on my own. I did apply for some scholarship recently and I had to pretend that I was still living in England because they won't deal with you if you unless you are living in the United Kingdom. So, I've given up on all that external funding. I told myself that if I want to do films and video and animation, I've just got to fund it myself. It's possible. The winters here are very long and they are very cold and I don't get many students at my school then. So, I take advantage of that period.
- SP:** It seems to me, looking at your career, it's always as though you were a part of the thrust as to where the apparatus was going. For example with desktop video, you did desktop video before there was desktop video. The way you were operating back then, is now, actually quite common. All over the world, there are kids working in their bedrooms, making music and making images. You did that 20 years ago, but it was much harder then.
- GS:** Yes, it was much harder and it was much more expensive. Now, you can spend £10,000 and buy the most wizard computer you can possibly imagine that is so humongously fast you can do anything. In those days you had to spend a lot more than £10,000 to get something that was workable. But, that being said, the great thing about this technology is that I know I can use pixel technology in my house. I don't have to go to an expensive studio and hire thousands of people at thousands of pounds a minute to do this kind of work for me. I have got RenderMan technology here in the house. I've got you know Maya, the animation software here in the house. I've got XSI Soft Image in the house. I've got the best music sequencers here in the house. I have the quality of audio that I could only dream of 20 years ago.
- SP:** Talking about dreaming of it, did you think it would ever get to where it is now?
- GS:** Yes, I believed that it would then. I had these fantasies in 1988 about having a textured 3 dimensional environment in which we could move and interact with and it wasn't too long before that sort of fantasy became a reality. You just have to think about the games like Doom, Half Life and all the rest of them. I knew that was going to happen, but the degree by which it happened, I was quite taken aback by.
- SP:** Quite a lot of artists that we've interviewed, not only do they work as artists, but sometimes they facilitate other people. Sometimes they don't work as the auteur but they're actually working with other artists on their projects. Did you ever do that?

GS: No. I did a little bit of work for Michael Mazière with LVA. I was helping other artists out for some show at the ICA, but no, I've not worked a great deal with others.

SP: Given your relative isolation, when you were producing and showing these works, did you feel that you were responding to, or were part of, a larger movement?

GS: Yes I did. I've always realised that you can't be an artist in isolation. It doesn't work that way. Picasso was a Cubist. George Grosz was an Expressionist. When you are in a club, or society of artists working together, their voice collectively is far stronger than anyone of them individually and that even included Picasso. So, with illustrations, I was part of that little group of radical illustrators. With video, I associated myself with that whole group of British video artists and experimenters in the 1980's. I saw myself as part of a trend and movement, although it was never that well defined. They never had a manifesto.

SP: But you got a sense of community when you went to The World Wide Video Festival. That was the time when the club came together.

GS: Yes, that was when you were seen as a British artist.

SP: Regarding an international perspective, how did you relate to what you were seeing from artists from other countries? Were you aware of a movement?

GS: I am not really sure how I relate, or it related, to those other people. I was aware of people like Nam June Paik for example. I do especially care for his work.

SP: Was there any point that you went to one of these festivals and saw something from Australia or from America or from France and think, "Wow!"

GS: I only did that once and that was World Wide Video Festival. I saw this chap who was spitting fire at another guy sitting on a chair. One guy was a machine representing something like Napalm, while the other guy was in a fireproof suit. This machine would spit out this petroleum at the guy and envelope him in a massive flame. It only lasted a brief moment. It was not enough to fry him, but it was enough to terrify me when I saw it. I saw that piece I just thought it was extraordinary. Another artist's work I quite like, but only in small doses, is Zbigniew Rybczynski. I quite liked the spiral of the DNA thing that he did. I thought that was very clever.

SP: Were there any specific ideas or people that influenced your work?

GS: Within video, initially it was George Barber. He came round to the house for some reason or another, and I saw his work. He also showed me some work by other people. I remember seeing Gorilla Tapes and several other people who were doing cut up and chopped up video. It struck me as being a great way to make a video. You get these nice shots; you steal from movies and then reassemble and mess around, rather like a Xerox, and make something else out of it. George was famous for his scratchy technique where

he would cut up and reuse the same piece of tape, over and over again just like DJ scratching on a turntable.

SP: Were you familiar The Duvet Brothers?

GS: We can't forget the Duvet Brothers, yes. I was really excited by them. I saw them and I thought, "This is great. This is what I want to do. I want to do something like this."

SP: What your influences in a broader sense. Where there ideas or people that influenced your work, who were not necessarily within a video context?

GS: I still retain influences from illustrators such as Stewart MacKinnon and Sue Cole. That graphic element stuck with me, and it keeps occurring and re-occurring in my work. It's been with me all my life.

SP: What about installation work? Your work was mainly single screen, but *Motorway* was different.

GS: Yes, I did *Motorway* as a 360-degree installation. *Motorway* was fascinating. At the time of making it, I was about to buy a house in Italy so I had to learn to drive. I was in my mid-thirties, which was quite late. I remember thinking, "Oh this is quite good. I quite enjoy this. Here I am with a steering wheel and an accelerator. I can go anywhere I like now." I just really wanted to show people where I'd been, so I stuck a camera in the seat next to me. Generally speaking, the camera was facing forwards, but it occurred to me that it would be quite nice to shoot with the camera facing to the right and facing backwards. I actually added a hole in the roof and pointed the camera in the other direction. I realised as I did that, that I could cut between 4 different viewpoints of the journey. It occurred to me that I could probably turn it into 360-degree environment. I made a single-screen version of *Motorway* and then Tom van Vliet said, "Why don't you make that into an installation?" I thought about how I'd got all these shots of the front, the side and the back, and I felt that we could do a 360 work with them. So we set the whole thing up. I think we got some wooden battens and some tracing paper and 4 projectors and we made the installation in the World Wide Video Festival.

SP: It was almost immersive wasn't it?

GS: Yes it was. But, I must tell you something about that. Tom then arranged for it to be shown at Video Brazil so we did the same thing at Video Brazil. We had wooden battens, 4 projectors and a lot of tracing paper around the wooden battens. I'll never forget one morning, just after the exhibition had opened, or maybe it was even just before the exhibition had opened in Sao Paolo, I took a peek inside the installation and there were 4 little chefs with their chef hats on, sitting in these car seats that we'd put in for people to sit on. The sight of four little chefs with their hats on watching *Motorway*, totally surrounded by this psychedelic environment, was so amusing.

- SP:** I like that piece. I recently re-bought Kraftwerk's *Autobahn* and every time I listen to *Autobahn*, I think of *Motorway*.
- GS:** Talking about influences, they were a major influence. I heard *Autobahn* for the first time in about 1975. It was an era when people were coming out of that progressive rock stage of the late 60's and early 70's. They'd gone past country rock and were into glamour and glitter. David Bowie and the like were popular at the time and then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere came this German band, Kraftwerk. When they did *Autobahn*, I heard it and I thought how fantastic it was. Everyone thought I was a bit of a square. To me, it was similar to the music that I'd liked as a boy, the Shadows, minimal, instrumental, clean and simple sound. Kraftwerk's music is so beautifully crisp and clear. I just went mad on Kraftwerk. I recently bought a DVD of Kraftwerk. In my mind's eye, Kraftwerk are these four, young, rather slick looking gents. I played the DVD and they are all old. They are as old as we are. It's really sad. People age, and your stars and your heroes age as well. It's not just that you age. They age as well. It's surprising somehow. I don't like it.
- SP:** So, you were an illustrator working in conventional media, although you used it unconventionally, then you got hold of Sinclair Spectrum computer. It's almost a different way around from most people, because most people went into video first and then went into computers. You went to computers and then video. What made you do it? I remember a lot of illustrators in late 70's and they were steadfastly ludite in terms of technology. What made George Snow break that mould?
- GS:** I know the exact moment that I flipped. It was when I connected the portable tape recorder to the Sinclair Spectrum to upload the data in the operating system from the tape, and there was a squeaky techno sound. The thought of this invisible data flowing from the tape recorder into the Spectrum making this little strange noise just totally fascinated me. I was hooked. It was like magic. In 1981, the high tiers of computing were things that were used by NASA to put men in space. They weren't things you had in your house.
- SP:** Originally of course, data was not image but it suddenly was.
- GS:** Yes, and then it became image. If it was just little butterflies flapping around the screen that you shoot up, or a little spaceship zipping around in black-and-white, it was a picture and I loved those pictures.
- SP:** I can sense that. I have shared that sense. When I was doing BASIC, I wrote some code and got a box and then brought it in. I was saying to friend "Look at that!" They were saying, "Steve, it's just a little box coming in. There is nothing amazing about it." They didn't get it that the fact, you were changing command lines into image. You could only understand the potential if you were doing that rather boring work.
- GS:** Yes, you were in control of this machine, and this machine could do all kinds of unexpected things. The first programme that I wrote that made me realise that it had a potential for art was when I did a FOUR-NEXT loop, and the FOUR-NEXT loop generated a series of random numbers. From the bottom left hand corner of the screen, it drew a line

randomly. Then it drew a circle of a random radius in a random colour and it played a random note. So what I got was a beeping music happening to like lines of circles coming from the screen. It was art. I was really pleased. It was the first piece of code that I wrote that was artistic. I was really pleased with it.

SP: Yes, I remember sharing the same sort of experience. We've talked a little bit about changing technology, but let's talk about how technology has changed. There have been massive, exponential changes since the early 1980s?

GS: Much as I am fascinated and completely addicted to the technology, I've always been a little bit worried about the use of technology in art. My worry has been that most of the software that we use has been programmed by programmers, who are not artists. It has been sold to you by salesmen, who themselves are not artists. I feel often, that as a consumer and user of this art, I am somehow secondary to the whole process. People have this perception of computer art as being something, which is simple, where the computer does 99% of the work and all you do is just press the button. They don't view it in the same light as something, which was being created by hand using traditional media such as oil paints and collage and charcoal. In many ways, in many people's perception, a work of art done with the traditional media is more important, more powerful, more skilful than anything I've done on a computer. They may be right. I don't know.

SP: Film theory has this idea called the Indexical, which refers to the thumbprint. It's the human mark in the work. I think that people who work with computer art feel that because they say that there is no such thing as the indexical within the digital process, which personally I think is wrong; they feel unease about being secondary users to this huge commercial machine. Beyond that however, a lot of computerised work tends to be subversive as well as somehow within the content of the work and the way they use it.

GS: I don't know if I am being especially subversive to the whole process of which I am a part and of which I am a mere consumer. But, I do know that the same rules and regulations that I ever applied to an oil painting or a collage or a drawing still apply to what I am doing now. I really have to think about the composition. I have to think about the balance. If I am animating a sequence of a train coming through a tunnel, I have to think about it in the same way as a film director or a cameraman would feel about setting up a shot for a movie. There is an awful lot of my involvement in that process, even though I think the general public would never understand that.

SP: Watching people operate equipment, and you are not an exception, there is an artistry. There is an artisanship. Ok, so you are just pressing a button, but there are a lot of tweaks you have to know and understand as well as things to invent and work around.

GS: That's our way of doing things. The way in which we would work is that we are the directors. We are the editors. In my case, I even do the programming of the machines that make the image. We do the full process, whereas many other directors may just come along and get a separate editor and another technician to do the work for them. I'm not like that. I am an artisan. I like to work with the nuts and bolts.

SP: What about your relationship with the academic community?

GS: It's pretty non-existent these days. My last experience with the academic community was a very, very bad one. From time to time I gave lectures at the Royal College of Art in the Illustration Department. My last lecture was when I was living in Brighton and I went up to the RCA with my Carousel full of slides and my videotapes in hand. I arrived at the illustration department and no one had prepared for my arrival. No students had been told that I was turning up. The lecture hall hadn't even been booked. It was a complete and utter shambles. I couldn't believe how shambolic it was at the Royal College of Art. As I was talking to Dan Fern, who's responsibility it was, a student came in complaining that, for the 4th time that month, the inks had been stolen from the printing machine. The whole thing just looked like a mess. I got £50 for that lecture, of which a goodly portion went in tax and national insurance. My train fare was about £13. I think I was left with about £5. I felt very cross and I've never been back to the Royal College of Art ever since, even though we've had quite a few teachers from the department to stay with us here. I have to say that academia in the United Kingdom is just fucking rubbish. Things may have changed now, but I've been to colleges where the standard of equipment and machinery was appalling, and where the standard of teaching was appalling. The standard of teaching was appalling because nobody wanted to teach in a British Art school because they have no money. We may be professionals and we may be doing well enough without having to work in colleges but we would like a bit of money. I've taught quite often in the Danish Academy. 10 years ago at the Danish Design School, they gave me £200 a day tax-free. I walked away from those teaching jobs feeling wealthy. So, I am always prepared to go back. But, British art schools are run down. The whole of British society is like that. It is a society with cancer. It is dieing. It is appalling. I look at Britain. I look at the way people live in Britain now, and I just think that I don't ever want to do that. I don't want to live there. I don't want to watch their TV. I don't want to read their newspapers. I don't want to involve myself with this country in any shape or form. I just don't want to be in Britain anymore. The whole country is dieing and I don't know why. It's just not dynamic anymore. The problem is a lack of good, talented, working-class boys like myself. That's what I want to see. If I see lots of working class boys coming up with their enthusiasm, I could get back into it but I am not going to sit there and teach in a society where half of the students are foreigners and they are only there because they are paying their fees and my particular class, or my gender, is virtually excluded from the system.

SP: I think you are largely talking about London. I think there are still things going on regionally.

GS: Quite possibly. I've been in Italy for 10 years, so what do I know anyway?

SP: What we've established though is that unlike quite a lot of the artists that we've talked to, including myself, who have had quite a steady relationship with the art schools, it's not really part of your story. The art schools aren't a narrative in your work.

GS: Just about all of my teaching has been involved with design. The only times I have ever talked about video and video art have been lectures I've given in odd places such as Cologne, Duncan of Jordanstone and the Royal Academy in Denmark.

SP: You've always been more of a visitor on the illustration side as well.

GS: Yes, I sort of pop in.

SP: Were there any other ways of disseminating your work other than festivals?

GS: No, but festivals were great. I would enter my work to any festival that I heard of and the people who were handling my work, such as Media 235 in Germany and places in France, would put the work about. It was great actually.

SP: What about LVA?

GS: LVA still handle my work, although I don't even know if it's being shown. There is a difference now. I would like to show my work around again via the web, but there isn't a web group. There isn't a web group of artists. So maybe REWIND can create a hub.

SP: We are certainly trying to interest curators. My view is that we have to reintroduce the work to a different generation of curators so they can rediscover it. Certainly, that's starting to happen and one keeps his fingers crossed.

GS: The thought of being rediscovered, makes me question how old are we getting. I felt like such a young man when I was doing that video. I feel being rediscovered is like digging my remains out of a hole in the ground.

SP: As an artist, you've not really been part of the art gallery world either. You don't really show in galleries.

GS: I once had some stuff shown at Tate Liverpool. But, generally I've always been very much an outsider of that whole art gallery thing. I never really understood how it worked.

SP: You didn't aspire to it?

GS: I would have liked to but there never seemed to be the opportunity. The Bill Violas of this world seemed to be part of a system that I knew nothing at all about. They started by teaching within art colleges while they had a gallery to one side. There is a whole system to take them along.

SP: Did you feel compromised by the lack of the work getting around and exhibited?

GS: I didn't feel compromised. I felt neglected.

SP: It didn't stop you making work?

GS: No, there is always something to make work about. The first video I have done in years was about the execution of the last pig in the Castello. To me, that was fascinating. I found it fascinating to see how a pig was processed from the shooting down to the sausage making, all in a 2-day process.

SP: It sounds like a metaphor for the computing process.

GS: Yes it does rather. But, that pig video was universally rejected by every single TV station in Europe. It's a good work actually.

SP: Do you feel separated from theoretical debates? Do you read film or video theory?

GS: No, I'm not an intellectual. I do my work because I feel I've got something to say. I think with my music it's maybe more political than my work has ever been. But, it's just my statement. I feel very strongly that I want to make a statement about Palestine or maybe it's about injustices muted out to Muslims. I can do that via music far easier than I could do it with video work. I feel very conscious that I have to have a voice, but it's my own private voice. The thing that's always bothered me with making films and being funded is that it's invariably a kind of compromise. In Europe now, if you want to make a film, you take money from this country and that country. Everybody wants a look in. The producer wants a look in. There is no more auteur. There are no more Fellinis. Because I don't like the way that European culture is going, I feel as though I have to fund it myself. That way, I can say whatever I like. The problem is that nobody gets to see it. But, at least I've said it. At least I've said it and I've done it and I put my point of view across even though it may be discovered in an archive in a million years time. At least I don't have to sit down and have a producer. The last funded work I did in Britain was for Maggie Ellis and the London Film and Video Development Agency. In 1995, made an animation using 3 Macintoshes. The machines worked very slowly and in order to get the film finished on time I stayed up all night. I had one machine rendering and when it finished I would reload the machine. I would put another sequence on another machine and another on the other machine. If I realised that I had time for half an hour's kip, I would lie down on the floor of the studio, sleep for a bit, then force myself awake in half an hour or so, reload that machine and go back to sleep again. By the time I got to the editing suite next morning, I was zonked and I actually fell asleep while they were editing. So Maggie Ellis made changes in my video. She said she thought that it worked better. I was just too tired and too exhausted to even fight that point. For me, that was a perfect metaphor. That's not how I want to work. This is my work. I am an artist. I am in control of it.

SP: What was the title of that work?

GS: It was called *Tall Story*. It's a story of a building under construction, which gets hit by lightning. When it is hit by the lightning, it comes to life and the girders stand up in the shape of a man.

SP: How was it distributed? How was it shown?

- GS:** That was shown on Carlton TV. Carlton TV were getting a reputation for producing junk and therefore were being forced, in order to keep their license, to do something worthy. They were being forced to do something cultural and artistic. So Maggie Ellis was responsible for commissioning things and I was one of the ones who were lucky enough to get funding. Maggie Ellis very kindly helped me. She got me £5000 and when it was obvious that £5000 wasn't enough she got me another £5000. So, I had some funding. That was nice and it was appreciated at that time. It got shown on Carlton and then it went around to festivals. The World Wide Video Festival was still going at the time, so it was shown there. It did that circuit.
- SP:** When you were editing your work in the early days, you weren't using facility houses. You had access to your own equipment.
- GS:** Yes, I bought an RM440 from Sony. That was a little two-way controller, one for the record machine one for the playback machine. It kept pretty good synch. I bought a littler ancillary controller to edit for the second playback machine. With the aid of a little wire, I was able to get all three machines in synch.
- SP:** It sounds like GPI, General Purpose Interface. It would send a little pulse to make the machine play. You'd get b-rolls and you'd be able to do dissolves.
- GS:** Yes, and these machines could keep in synch. That was the amazing thing. With video being so complex and time-base correctors being needed, it kept these two machines running in synch. I had bought two time-based correctors and a little synch pulse generator so the studio kept in pretty good lock. I also purchased a little tiny Vision Mixer with 4 wipes on it, cross-fade and fade to black. It was really simple and primitive, but I did *Shuttle Disaster* with that. I did *Muybridge Revisited* with that. It wasn't until I did *The Assniation* that I moved up to like a bigger fancier Vision Mixer. The T12 it was called.
- SP:** And this was all low-band-U-matic?
- GS:** Yes, it was all low-band-U-matic. The thing about low-band-U-matic is that if you take care, if you are very, very conscious of what you are doing, you can keep the quality pretty high. There are some images I don't mind being butchered, they can keep themselves looking nice and clean. Other colour experimentations after two or three generations of low-bands just look like mud. They look like noisy mud. So a lot of it was down to like choosing the right image that worked and that held itself together.
- SP:** That includes shooting it well and being conscious of that.
- GS:** Yes, shooting it well with good lighting was important. You could do it with that technology.
- SP:** In those days, there were a lot of little black boxes designed by little companies with little English engineers.

GS: Yes, there really were. I came across a few of those black boxes. I had a RGB PAL encoder made by a chap, whose name was Eric. I opened it up once and there were some extra soldering pieces that he put inside with a few little cross-wires and jumpers-back and it worked. I even used that stuff for some of my commercial work. I used it for my pop-video work.

SP: Can we talk about that pop-video work?

GS: When I look back on my early work like *The Love Video*, *Dogs* and *I Was Wearing a Gold Dress*, I look back at it with fondness. I think that this was work, which had a quality to it. If I look at my pop-video work, I am not that happy with it. I look at it and it just looks dreadful. It just looks very quickly put together. I did a couple of pop-videos for Jack 'n Chill, a sort of acid-house type band. They were not bad. They somehow retain a quality to them. I did some for The Shadows, some for The Stranglers and some for an Indian fellow called Bappi Lahari. I feel quite embarrassed by all that stuff. It looks cheap and thrown together. I wouldn't say that I am ashamed of it, but I'd rather it was all forgotten about. I am glad it's there but I don't want to look at it.

SP: But did you use that work to fund the more your more serious artistic work?

GS: Yes, I did. Certainly I did. I did a Howard Jones video, which I got paid an astronomical sum of money for doing. That really did help out.

SP: I have this image of you always at a desk, mixing and processing stuff, but this would involve you in directing. How did you approach that?

GS: I quite enjoyed directing. For me it was a very, very simple task. Whether it was a pop star, an actor or an actress, I basically gave them some kind of direction. When it came to directing actors and actresses that was easy, because rather like Fellini, I had a notion of what I wanted them to do. I saw in my head a drawing of the scene and I just said, "You have to do this and you have to do that. Then somewhere in the middle, you do something like this." Then I'd just let them adlib on that theme. That was easy enough to do. I drew those dramas. They weren't so much directed as drawn. With pop stars it was the same. I would just get them in a position, frame the camera and tell them to mime or sing their song. Then it would all get mixed in. The technology I had in my home was very simple. I had a big black screen, which was a black roll of paper. They stood against the black roll of paper and I lit them as best as I could with a backlight behind them. Then I was able to key them out against the black. There were no blue-screens involved. This was the simplest possible technology, but it worked.

SP: Did you shoot all the videos like that?

GS: All of them

SP: Would you say people came to you for a particular look then?

GS: Yes, they wanted this kind of jazzy psychedelic look and that's what I did. There was one video that I did that, and I still like, and that was *Motorway*. It wasn't so much done as a pop video. It wasn't a commission. It was just something I wanted to do, and it came out of Tom van Vliet's installation, which I did for him. I did that with care.

SP: So that was initially a pop-video idea but it grew into something else?

GS: Yes, it was a sort of a pop-video idea that grew into something art-y. I actually forget what came first. I can't remember whether the single tape came first or whether the 4-tape version came first. I don't know to be honest with you.

SP: Was there an involvement with the band, Art of Noise?

GS: Yes, I chose 4 or 5 songs that I liked by Art of Noise. I asked a studio in Sheffield, called Fon, to remix them. I asked Fon to put them into one long, 20-minute piece. I gave them a couple of hundred pounds for it and they remixed it and sent me back a tape. That tape then formed the basis for the video. Channel 4 showed it once, but it was about 3 o'clock in the morning. I got £200 for it, so you could say it was a commercial piece of work.

SP: It's interesting that the work lives in different orbits.

GS: Yes. The pop video was interesting, because there was a fellow called Charlie Gillett, who was well known as a great broadcaster. I met him and he heard and saw *Shuttle Disaster*. Then, he asked me to direct a couple of videos for him. One was for Howard Jones, who was on the Warner Brothers label. After that though, I was more serious about my art video than I was about my pop video. I didn't really want to become a pop video director because I don't really like pop-stars and record business people. There are one or two good souls in there, but by and large they are a bunch of creeps. As I got more and more serious about my art video work, which was about the time of *The Assignment* in 1988, I had to gradually drift away from Charlie Gillett and that whole pop scene. I worked a little bit for Derek Green in China Records. A fellow called Dai Davis commissioned me to do a lot of work in the days of post-punk. I was doing graphic design for people like 999 and then when I got into video with George Barber, he commissioned George and I to do some work for the Art of Noise. The video I directed with George was pretty good I thought. It wasn't bad at all but some of the other work I did was dreadful.

SP: You would see it as a means to an end?

GS: Yes, it gave me a bit of pocket money and it helped me buy a few more expensive machines.

SP: When do you think you started drifting more towards the computer side of things? Did you wake up one morning and think, "Oh, now I am a 3D designer."

GS: With me, that's usually how it works. I did wake up one morning and say, "Today I'm not going to smoke" hence, I stopped smoking that day. There was no conscious decision. It

was just something that had always been ticking around the back of my mind. One day I smoked, the next day I didn't. One day I am a video director. The next day I am an animator. I discovered animation with a programme called Swivel 3D around about 1990. In those days, RenderMan from Pixar actually ran on a Mac and this little program, Swivel 3D, would address RenderMan. It was fantastic. I discovered animation in 1990. I gradually drifted away from video work and pop video work and by about 1992, when I did Motorway, I'd run out of ideas. I didn't really have anything fresh I wanted to say as far as psychedelic graphic-y videos went. I would have liked to have directed some more conventional dramas such as *William Wilson*, which I had been planning to do for several years. The European Script Fund gave me some money to go away and write a script and it was almost accepted by ZDF. ZDF didn't accept it in the end. I think there were changes in the air. *William Wilson* is a fantastic story, by Edgar Allan Poe, about a chap and his double. I'd slightly re-written the story. *William Wilson* is about morality. It's about good and bad. It's about how one could have a conscience; and the conscience is bugging one, forcing one to do things. I've never liked conscience. I always tried to fight against it. I wanted to take this *William Wilson* story and have the voice of the conscience eventually killed by the narrator. I prefer evil to good somehow, I don't know why. I don't like good. The trouble I have with good, is that it's always bad. When the Evil Saddam Hussein is defeated by the Good George Bush, something is wrong there. I think the roles are probably reversed. In fact, Saddam Hussein is probably an angel in Heaven by now, and a good man. George Bush will go to hell with his badness. I tried to work these ideas about good and evil out, and so *William Wilson* would have been a great project to have worked on. I just couldn't persuade ZDF that they should do it.

SP: In some ways though, when you woke up as a 3D animator you could be seeing it as a return to illustration.

GS: Yes, very much. When you make a shape with a 3D programme, you are drawing it. You are consciously trying to design it and balance it doing all those things that you did as a draftsman, to make it fit. Then, when you've got this object, and you've got that object, you've got to have an element that is this thing that flows between them: the composition. It's interesting how much illustration has influenced my video work. When I frame a shot in video, I always look very much at the 4 edges of the screen and whatever I position in that frame, whether it is a head or an object I make them work with the edge of the screen. That's an idea that I get from drawing. When you put a figure or a bowl of fruit in a composition, you look at the 4 corners and the 4 edges of your composition, and you make it all work together. You look at a Hockney, or you look at any artist, Picasso for example, the edges of the picture are as important as what's in the picture and that's the way I would frame a shot. So all of that, and notions of light and tone as well as notions of colour, all come from my days as an illustrator. So, there is a lot that flows through.

SP: You've got very heavily involved in all sorts of software. You've been involved with all latest software for the last 15 years. You've almost beta-tested some of the stuff?

GS: Yes, I always like to use the latest software. I like to use the latest operating system and the fastest possible computers. It gives me a pleasure. It's a form of addiction. Most of

the software that I buy, I get at educational prices, which is bloody useful. Having the latest equipment and software works very well, but every once in a while I get a real hassle. I have been using Windows Vista lately. Windows Vista is a fantastic operating system but people have to write drivers for it. Without the driver your software doesn't work correctly. I bought a fantastic audio sequencing programme from a German company not so long ago and they told me "No problem with Vista". I put it on Vista and it's crashing my machine every 5 seconds. I was beta-testing the software for them really and they were incorrect me to tell me that it would work with Vista. I got very angry with them. I was seriously angry and in the end they took the software back and returned my money. So, yes, I sure I am a beta-tester. I bought some plug-ins from Sony recently. They are very, very expensive plug-ins for audio work and again, as soon as I loaded them, there was the blue screen of death, and bang, the whole computer shut down and had to be rebooted. On the other hand, they were very, very good. I did an analysis of the problem with my computer, I sent them all the data on a disk, they paid for the disk to be sent to the United States, and within about 2 weeks, my problem was solved. If you've got a company that's on the ball, it's great to work with them and then you know that their tech support will help you.



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