



## REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s Interview with Malcolm Dickson

Interview by Professor Stephen Partridge, Emile Shemilt and Adam Lockhart, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2007

**SP:** What do you consider to be the most important works that you've been involved with, both as a practitioner and as a facilitator?

**MD:** Well that is probably the most difficult question to answer. The issues involved in that question would seem to suggest the construction of a canon around the practice, which isn't something that I necessarily identify with. However, the need for such canonisation is necessary in order for the practice to be institutionally validated. In terms of a question asking if there are works that are important but not necessarily widely acknowledged within the sector, I would tend to plot a history through events rather than individual works of art or the works of individual practitioners. For me, it's about plotting a history, which has some relevance to the Scottish Art narrative specifically. That narrative is already fractured, inconsistent and subject to conflicting opinions. Within that practice of the visual arts within Scotland, video has occupied quite an interesting position. It's one that can be tracked. Because of the short history and because of the size of the country, you can actually begin to plot many of all the events that have happened. Although that history is quite short, a lot of it is forgotten. The remit of REWIND has identified certain starting points but also the absence within art discourse to the practice of video art. A starting point for me in terms of where I was coming from as a practitioner, would be someone like Margaret Tait who was a fore-runner to video practice as a Scottish filmmaker and a poet. She seems to come from an experimental tradition that could be linked back to her, which I find quite interesting in the light of current practice, where most artists are quite comfortable moving between media – film, video, photography, new media, web-based works etc. Obviously in the early 70's, there is the much quoted activities of David Hall within Scotland in 1971, when he was commissioned to make a whole series of fairly radical conceptual art interruptions on TV. It is interesting, not talking about the work so much, but the structures in which that happened. It is interesting that broadcast TV within Scotland would be open minded enough to go for that proposal in the first place. It's also interesting the role of facilitating organisations, such as the Scottish Arts Council, played. They were one of the main commissioners of that series of works, and I think that fact has probably been forgotten by both the mainstream broadcasting industry and the Scottish Arts Council. Going back to that starting point, which a lot of people say is the beginning of British Video Art, but also the first ever television intervention is very interesting. It is very interesting for Scotland. Following that, as far as I can detect, were a number of events that happened, including a few at the Scottish Arts Council Gallery. In 1973 there was an exhibition called *Open Circuit*. That included video installations by David Hall and Tony Sinden. They were shown alongside photography works and film works by other artists. That was followed a show called *Open Cinema*. That involved a few artists involved with the London Filmmakers Co-operative and the programme introduction by Deke Dunsiberre, who stated "This programme of expanded cinema offers Edinburgh the

opportunity to see recent examples of an area of international avant-garde filmmaking. By inviting film artists to present new work The SAAG is opening new perspectives in the cinema, perspectives yielding film installations, which should be viewed not in the narrow context of conventional film history but in the general context of art history." That outlined a challenge in terms of being able to position things within the Fine Art sector. Of course in 1976 there was the show at the Third Eye Centre – *Video Towards Defining An Aesthetic*. It argued for specific codes of consideration in the medium and David Hall's article in the small catalogue that was produced, started by saying, "A brief attempt at some of the distinctions between video and film maybe useful" So there were some interesting debates emerging at that time that set the pace, but I don't think they have quite been resolved yet. Of course you (SP) and Tamara Kirkorian, were the organisers of that exhibition, supported by Lyndsay Gordon, who was an arts officer at the time. There was a symposium held at the same time which was called *The Future of Video in Scotland* and the papers of that exist in the National Libraries in Edinburgh. I haven't seen them yet, but I've.. I've heard reports of them. It wasn't until 1979 that Tamara Kirkorian's exhibition, *An Ephemeral Art*, took place in April 1979 at the Third Eye Centre. Then it was shown in October 1979 at the Fruitmarket Gallery. It's quite interesting that one should go to the Third Eye Centre and then to the Fruitmarket as well. That exhibition was in 1979, so there are some confusions around when were the origins of video art in Scotland. Some people have said it started with Tamara Kirkorian's exhibition. Some of that history has been discussed in Variant magazine in a discussion that Chris Byrne, formally of the French Film and Video Festival, and I had several years ago. That was the point when I became particularly interested in a mission of trying to track histories, in order to make sure that things were in proper place and therefore protected from the historical revisionism that so often seems to plague the art sector. It wasn't until 1986 that the next major show devoted to video happened. That was at Transmission and it was called *Event Space*. That was organised again by you (Stephen Partridge) with the active assistance of Alan Robertson and Doug Aubrey, who worked together as Pictorial Heroes. I was on the committee of Transmission at that time, and it was very much in keeping with the broadening out of our philosophy. It was quite a small scene in Glasgow, which is quite interesting to look back on. You are never aware of how significant events are at the time of their origin. Unfortunately, it's only with the benefit of hindsight that we look back and say, "Actually, that was fairly resonant". If we'd known it at the time, perhaps the arguments that could have been put forward to the art sector may have been sharper but I think that was a timely intervention. I recall that Clyde Cable existed for a short time. It did a feature on that show. It was a short documentary that the television workshop did, which documented it. It included interviews with Steve Littman, with Doug Aubrey and Alan Robertson, with you (SP) and with myself.

**SP:** Why do you think there was such a gap between Tamara Krikorian's show, which as you've said is signposted by quite a lot of people for different reasons. It is not until 6 years later until you mark another milestone. Was there nothing going on during that period?

**MD:** I'm sure there probably was, but there's no documentation that I have come across that suggests that any of the major galleries gave consideration to the medium of video or to any other type of expanded practice. Video may have been included in various shows. It

may have happened at the Third Eye Centre, where there was a show of Irish Art Now in the early 80's. That included people like Alistair McLennan and Nigel Rolfe, but there was nothing devoted to the video medium.

**SP:** There was a conference that Doug Aubrey organised with the then director of The Third Eye Centre, Mike Tooby, it was in either 1984 or 1985. What is also interesting is that with *Event Space 1* at Transmission we showed David Hall's *Television Interruptions*. We actually got them on film. We had them on film because we showed some other films. It is rare that they are shown on film. They were broadcast in 1971, and this show was 15 years after those historic transmissions. I don't think it's an exaggeration to use term 'historic'. So it was a 15-year gap until the work was shown again in Scotland. Although its original format was the broadcast, it was shown in its original state as film. I think that is quite intriguing. It does seem to be rather stuttering start with a few paces forward and a little activity. I don't think there was ever no activity. I think there was little activity, but there was certainly little recognised activity.

**MD:** Another thing happening in Scotland at the time was of course the department in Dundee, which was beginning to attract students from all over. There was also the Environmental Art course at Glasgow School of Art. There was a whole generation of artists who I think had been influenced by artists such as Alistair McLennan and also the wider, more cutting edge aspects of contemporary art. There would have been few opportunities to see that art in the flesh, but I think through various publications artists were aware of it. I know that Puberty Institution - Douglas Gordon and Craig Richardson had first come across Alistair McLennan's work through images that were in the British Art Show catalogue. It's quite interesting how images can be quite influential. I know Stuart Brisley was a big name in performance art circles and there was a lot of material circulating on him. The other influence at the time was *Performance Magazine*, which at the time was the only consistent forum covering a wide range of expanded practice, from performance to other time-based media including sound. It covered video work as well. Nick Houghton used to be a regular contributor to that as well as regularly contributing to *Independent Media*, which was going concurrently. *Independent Media* had a slightly different remit insofar as it covered documentary and the wider practice of video. There was only a certain element of *Independent Media* that would use the word 'art' for example. So I would identify three strands that certainly intersected through different people. There was the developing department in Dundee, the emerging department of Environmental Art in Glasgow and there was Transmission Gallery as well, which had a mix of people on its committee. DER sponsored the show at Transmission, *Event Space 1*, through a video wall and Pictorial Heroes thereafter secured further sponsorship from that company in order to do a number of installations. One was in the autumn of 1986, and one was in 1987, which was at the Society of Scottish Artists, at the RSA in Edinburgh. It was really through the enlightened viewpoints of George Wylie that it was allowed to happen. They were quite adventurous installations at the time. They were using multiple monitors. It was something that left a very strong memory.

**SP:** The work also had a very overt political content. It was unusual to marry that avant-garde with the overtly political intent.

- MD:** Pictorial Heroes and others, yourself (SP) included were involved, in what was a campaign. It was a lobbying campaign to try and get recognition for video and other types of practices within the arts. Meetings were held with the Arts Council and with the Film Council to try and pull those two areas together, to recognise video as an art practice and to secure the proper support for it. I think a token move forward was made when the Arts Council started the Visual Arts Video bursaries in 1986/87. Pictorial Heroes, myself and a third artist were recipients of that. That ran for a subsequent year and then it stopped. The successor to that was something called The New Project Scheme and that began to recognise not just video but other aspects of installation, performance, artists' film and such like. That lasted for 2 or 3 years and then that stopped as well. So things have started, ended then started again. It's back to the drawing board every time. There's been a lack of consistency in this area under question and also fairly inconsistent coverage. When I was involved in Transmission, we started a magazine at the time called Variant. It was an extension to our activities. It was about trying to create a space for practice to happen but also in some way, take control of the organs for critical discourse, which was relatively easy to do at that time.
- SP:** Yes, because there was nobody writing anything. There wasn't much critical discourse, so it was filling a vacuum.
- MD:** There wasn't, no. Alba magazine started in 1986, but there hadn't been a purely dedicated visual arts magazine prior to that.
- SP:** They are worlds apart though because Alba was very much a celebratory of the arts, while Variant was aspiring to be much more about debate and discourse and critique.
- MD:** Yes, Variant was attempting to document the new endeavours in art. At least that's what it stated at the time. Those 2 magazines ran in parallel and I suppose the fact that they were polar opposites made them quite complimentary, because the mainstream work that was happening in the major galleries got covered while work on the periphery did as well.
- SP:** But in two camps
- MD:** Yes, often they were in opposition as well. Another event, which is important to mention within that timeline of activities and the connection with Dundee, is the *Interference* show that happened at the Seagate Gallery in Dundee. I remember that been quite an important show. Several different installation works were shown, mostly all multi-monitor pieces. Pictorial Heroes, Alistair McDonald and others were in that show.
- SP:** There seemed to be quite a lot of activity at one point but then later it seemed almost staccato where there was no activity or little activity. The activities seem fragmented in terms of the critical writing, yet an incredible amount of work was being made, from the mid 80's and for the following 10 years. There was huge amount of work been made in Dundee.
- MD:** There were a number of single tape packages emerging during that time, 1988/89, which overlapped with 1990/91 - *Fields and Frames, Made in Scotland I, II and III, Semblances*

and the other packages. Interestingly, bar *Made in Scotland*, the other packages not only got Arts Council support, but got money to buy playback equipment, a couple of monitors and a couple of U-matic decks. Therefore, it was addressing this difficulty that venues had in being able to plug something into the wall. I think that that was quite important. So, those tapes were shown quite widely, including abroad. Parallel to doing Variant magazine, we brought out a video version of it. Unfortunately it was only 2 tapes. They were a one off. It tried to combine opinions and discourse along with profiling some students' work. It was pretty polished work, it must be said. That had some limited circulation and got quite a few reviews. It went to various places abroad. So, there were activities happening.

**SP:** *Made in Scotland* I was actually for an American tour originally. Ian Hadow put that together. There was a big London scene going on with LVA, was there a sense of reaction to that or was it complimentary? Was there a different identity in Scotland?

**MD:** I don't recall that being expressed through the practice itself or the medium. I think what might have been introduced was more of an artistic vernacular to the practice. I think a lot of work that was coming out of Dundee was quite influenced in its formal considerations to do with video, which might be conceptual or to do with the way that the work was displayed and linked with aspects of video sculpture. The use of the multi monitor set-up was quite interesting. It was dependent on one resource being able to make that available, which was either the department in Dundee or prior to that a company being able to sponsor it. That wasn't something that preoccupied me as an issue. I was more interested in a wider field of practice. I came out of the painting department of Glasgow School of Art, fairly disenchanted as everyone did at the time. I tried to dabble in some film work, but it wasn't recognised or it wasn't taken into consideration as part of the degree. As far as I recall, it was probably getting exposure to stuff that might have been coming out of the London Filmmakers Co-op that was influential very early on. I remember Malcolm LeGrice's *Berlin Horse* for example. It was through seeing these things on TV rather than in an arts venue or at the Filmmakers Co-op itself, that I got exposure to such things. Other people's work like Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*) was influential in the way that it was made with multiple images and the poetic and political narrative to it. It was a tradition from elsewhere. By introducing it into a Scottish context, there was something quite interesting about it or so it seemed to me, in the intellectual bohemian tradition. They are certainly two works that left an impression upon me in the earlier part of the 80s.

**SP:** You talk about the work coming out of Dundee, which might infer a 'school' in the approach to something. I have never looked at it that way, because at least half of the artists coming to Dundee were from Glasgow and they were passing through, either literally making one piece of work or they were students who come on a post-grad. Often artists come back, which indeed you did and Doug Aubrey and Alan Robertson as Pictorial Heroes did. So, I didn't really see it as a school. I didn't see a single approach. Undoubtedly technology does have an influence. We were always trying to get the best kit for the artists to allow them to experiment with things that maybe they weren't doing even down in London at that time. I know that we had better facilities than London Video Arts did for a long time. But I still didn't see it as a unified approach. I don't think there was a Dundee School of thought or approach.

**MD:** There is a sense of false memory syndrome. I think it was more the sophistication with which the work was made that would perhaps define it more than a thematic concern or something that gelled as a school.

**SP:** The Television Workshop allowed everyone. It wasn't a club.

**MD:** No it wasn't and it started quite early. It was in 1985/86. That was quite early days. I think it just became more eclectic as the years went on and as more and more students and artists were attracted to the place. As the years went on it had more of a magnetic pull for people. Knowing the artists that I've worked with over the years there are very few people who haven't actually been to Dundee, which is quite interesting. There are some but very few.

**SP:** Lets talk about your own practice. Your first works were in film, but at some point you made the step towards video. When was the earliest time you did that?

**MD:** That was through the Visual Arts Video Bursary that the Arts Council had advertised, which I'd applied for. It seemed appropriate to what I was doing. Although I was in the painting department, I wasn't a painter. It was actually print-making that I wanted to do because that seemed more in line with a multi-layered assemblage type of approach. You could almost do anything with printmaking. Painting was too laboured and was too studio based, while there is nothing wrong with that now, it was something I rebelled against at the time. I wasn't happy in painting and the stuff I used to do was more collage-based types of work. Then tried to incorporate Super 8 into my work. It was unsuccessful at the time of my degree show, but it seemed like a natural extension to then move towards video, because as a medium you can put a number of different things on it. It can embrace a multi-layered, multi-textual approach to art making.

**SP:** Yes quite a lot of artists feel that way. With the idea of the 'Dundee Approach', it is especially true because we were trying to get the technology that allowed layering. It was quite expensive.

**MD:** The very idea of a 3-machine edit was really quite mind blowing at the time. It was very frightening as well because there weren't many people around to help. I had a day's induction and then I was just stuck in an edit suite.

**SP:** That was with the fellowship?

**MD:** Yes, it was with the Arts Council grant.

**SP:** What works did you make with it?

**MD:** There was a tie in to Dundee. If you were a recipient of that award you undertook the work in Dundee. I made two main works. One was called *XS*. It used appropriated images from TV. I made it as an installation work, which was shown at The Smith Biennial in 1988. That was quite an interesting show because there weren't any biennial shows or open

shows existing in Scotland that I was aware of. It was also receptive to the new areas of performance. Puberty Institution were in that. I know that for the show in 1989, Douglas Gordon won the Smith Biennial Prize. Another work that I made was called *Arrival Departure*. It was included in Made in Scotland. I'd used a lot of old, home-movie, Super-8 film. It also took an installation form, which was shown at the AVE Festival in Arnheim, and at the Third Eye Centre, in Glasgow. Then it existed as a single tape. It was shown at a few events but there are technical problems with that piece, in terms of the sound that through the wonders of digital technology now, might still be re-addressed. I got a lot of mileage out of that fellowship, considering it was only £1000 grant. So then it seemed natural to come back to do the post-grad course in Dundee, which is what I did. The fellowship was for 9 months, from 1988 through to 1989.

**SP:** What works or people inspired your practice? Would you say the practice comes into your facilitation? Your work as a writer and as a curator and organiser is not in a vacuum. There are connections there with your practice.

**MD:** Yes. It depends on any one day or what mood I'm in. In terms of the connections, nothing exists in a vacuum. In terms of theory and ideas, the writings of Situationist International were quite influential on me while I was at Art School. I did my dissertation on them, so through that I actually got to find out about Guy Debord's films, which used appropriated images at times with a narrative or critique. It's a very simplistic approach now, but I guess it was quite radical at the time. It influenced French filmmakers like Chris Marker or Alain Resnais with *Last Year in Marienbad*. So, there was a range of influences.

**SP:** You mentioned how The Arts Council supported your work in various ways as well as the role Dundee played in facilitating, training, educating and being a centre. Were there other facilitating areas or areas of activity in Scotland during that period?

**MD:** In Scotland there were few resources, although there did exist the Scottish Association of Workshops, which came out of the community art perspective. Within Glasgow there was Glasgow Film and Video Workshop. It was interesting because it embraced people with different interests. They were another main resource in terms of the kit they had available but not in terms of the expertise of the personnel.

**SP:** But they were quite open to the type of people who could use the facilities, whereas the Edinburgh one was perceived as very closed off.

**MD:** Edinburgh was a closed shop, yes. I suppose Glasgow Film and Video Workshop was a step ahead of the older workshop model and recognised the need to try and adapt as the sector broadened out and changed. So a few artists became involved in that. Ken Gill became the Co-ordinator of the Film and Video Workshop in 1988. He came to Glasgow just at the time when I was finishing up with Transmission. He'd come from Berlin, where he'd been living for a couple of years after having moved from Projects UK, which he helped set up with Jon Bewley and Simon Herbert. It was a group of artists that supported performance practice. Prior to that, it had been the Basement Group. That was quite interesting because it was another perspective coming in because while I was at Transmission, one of the other organisations in the UK, who were quite supportive, was

Projects UK. There was very little in Scotland but the people who took an interest in what we were doing were Projects UK. They recognised a certain complexion to Transmission that reminded them of the Basement group in that it was a supposedly free, experimental space in which anything could happen.

**SP:** There was also the distance from London and its domination.

**MD:** That was quite important as well, because Projects UK and Transmission, at that time, were part of an assertiveness of a certain regional self-determination that deliberately sidestepped with an attitude of, "Oh that comes from London so, you we can do it just as well". That was quite significant. I think that the origins of performance art have a contested history. As people scabble amongst themselves to set up different archives for performance art, the sources of its origins are located in different places. One would suggest that it's in the Northern cities which were distanced enough from London to give it its radical and maverick stance.

**SP:** That's interesting because eventually, The National Review of Live Art came to Scotland and it's been here ever since. That wasn't Northern, but it was Midland. It was in Nottingham, at the Midland Group. It had one year at the ICA in London, but obviously the two things did not like each other, so it came to Glasgow and it's been in Glasgow ever since. There is always a link between performance and video. Often the artists are the same and there's also conceptual practice issues that overlap and intersect, so there were a lot of networks happening there.

**MD:** Prior to that Jeff Nuttall was a big influence to me with his book Bomb Culture, which he wrote in 1966.

**SP:** He was Leeds wasn't he more than anywhere else?

**MD:** Yes, Leeds then Liverpool - the regions. I think he always lived in the North. He was a poet, playwright, jazz musician and performance artist. He did a couple of interesting performance art memoirs that might have even predated Performance Magazine emerging.

**SP:** It's interesting that you mention him because of course another influence in Scotland, for me, was Tom McGrath, who was also a playwright and jazz musician. I think he very much informed the approach that we were taking here, which was a bit more cross art form and a bit more relaxed than the specialisms. We didn't try to distinguish between being a performance artist, being a video artist, or being a painter. We didn't bother. We were just interested in making something. Nuttall reminds me of that. Of course Alistair McLennan was also influential in Scotland. Dave Harding and I used to talk quite a lot. We considered ourselves to be 'academic cousins' with a lot of similar problems

**MD:** McGrath came out of the counter-cultural tradition, when you could call it a counter-culture. There are always alternatives present, but I think that that cross-media type of approach is an interesting one. In actual fact, by not becoming too pre-occupied in the specificity of an individual medium, ironically strengthens the individual element within that. That liberating



'anything goes thereby anything goes well' approach is one that I still derive some inspiration from. I would extend that into how organisations might function as well. Tom McGrath was the first director of the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow.

SP: They found the building 1974. In 1975 they opened. They opened the year before *Video: Towards Defining an Aesthetic*

MD: It had been running in a space on Blythswood Square prior to that

SP: Yes, with some elderly water colourists or something like a Society of Elegant Ladies. But Tom had his mind very much on a multi-art form, cross-art form, venue with that 'anything goes, goes well' attitude; hence the slightly hippy name 'Third Eye'. For me, referring to the question, "what are some of the wider influences?" rather than just saying, "I am interested in the ideas of John Cage", it is people like Tom McGrath and that whole spirit of approach, because that facilitated so many types of things. That was what made it very exiting in Scotland. When I came to Scotland in 1984, that spirit had originally happened 10 years before, but there still seemed to me to be a resonance going on. Everybody told me everything had gone, it was dead, but I didn't find that.

MD: It's a good example the blending of the local with the international. Allen Ginsberg did a performance piece in 1969 or 1970, in Blythswood Square. He did that performance alongside some musicians from Glasgow. One of the guys who played with him played at Street Level last week in actual fact. He is a writer and a musician. The Third Eye Centre was interesting as an art centre because it did have grounding within the locality that it was based in, but they could pick up the phone and invite somebody from wherever it might be to come. I think that aspect is much underappreciated because the local/international blending has always been a strong aspect to what I identify as the more progressive Scottish culture. It's the conservative forces that like to suppress the reality of the situation. That obviously serves the function of the Scottish Inferiorism quite well.

SP: Even though we have the Edinburgh International Festival.

MD: Yes, the Edinburgh Festival has dominated culture and politics ever since I can remember.

SP: Yes, but things like that are seen as the establishment aren't they? They distance people and artists from the international in a sense because it requires looking up at something on a pedestal or on the stage. Ginsberg being in *Kaleidoscope* had a resonance, which was local and international simultaneously. It still resonates. It's interesting how people will talk about one event for the rest of their lives, even though it might only have been 15 minutes long.

MD: Images exist of that event. The photographer, George Oliver took photographs at the time. He happened to be the husband of Cordelia Oliver who was a critic, but it's through the images that George Oliver took, that we remember a lot of events that happened. Interestingly, a long time ago, I was in a meeting in that venue, when The Third Eye Centre was changing over. There was two skips outside and catalogues being thrown in. I was having a meeting with the marketing guy up the stairs. I saw some tapes and in some

metal containers and asked what they were. It was a reel-to-reel of the Ginsberg performance. I can't remember what happened, whether I said I would take it or what, but I'm pretty sure it would have gone in the bin as well. There was this idea that you could just dispose of all these things. Hopefully it wouldn't happen now, but then it was a bit frustrating. With the earlier influences from the period that's under question, I suppose I've really thought less about than more recent things. In terms of the local and international, my influences, RD Laing was part of that same circle that Nuttall and McGrath revolved in. That was a very different tradition to the Hugh Macdiarmid dominated notion of what Scottish culture is. I still think that that is a really strong element that still has to be teased out from that tradition.

**SP:** I'm not quite so aware of that. Maybe I don't pick up on it as an Englishman. Maybe I'm immune. I see the strong voices as being people like George Wylie, Alistair McLennan and Richard Demarco: the slightly awkward people. They were awkward for the establishment because they were questioning it. Macdiarmid doesn't come into my mind very much because I wasn't schooled in it I suppose.

**MD:** Alistair McLennan left in 1966 to do a scholarship in the States and I think it was that leaving that really opened out the landscape for him. He still recalls that in interviews when discussing the restrictive art education that he had. I think it's all changed now. Demarco was very influential. George Wylie is a highly ignored artist, I feel. He really should have been in the first Scotland in Venice event. He is a key figure, I think.

**SP:** I agree. We invited him to top the opening ceremony of Dundee Contemporary Arts, which I thought was rather nice. We asked who we were going to invite to bless the place as an art place, and it was Wylie. It was Andrew Nairn's idea. It was resisted by some but in the end it went through, rather appropriately, I thought. It seems that with all of these people that we have been talking about, you could describe them as rather generous spirits. They've always been very interested in the next generation of artists and have facilitated that. It's been very important to them, central in fact.

**ES:** You talked earlier about moving from a fine art background towards film and then moving into video. Can you talk about how you started moving towards becoming a facilitator?

**MD:** Becoming a facilitator wasn't really conscious. When myself and other colleagues joined Transmission in 1985, it was fantastic because there was no programme decided upon. There was an annual general meeting of the Transmission Committee. It had been closed for 9 months and they said, "If people don't put up their hands now that's it. It is closed down." We did and that basically allowed us to do what we wanted. The tenure on the committee lasted for 2 years, which is still the case with Transmission. It is quite good because then you always get new people coming in with their own remit. One particular strand that Transmission had was the area around moving image, which really emerged from Event-Space 1. We did 2 subsequent seasons, which were Event Space 2 and Event Space 3. Event Space 2 put together some recent Scottish Super 8 film work. Cordelia Swann presented New Films by Women, which I think was a Film and Video Umbrella package. Charlie Hooker did a performance in the rear space of the old Transmission Gallery. As part of his performance he recruited students from the Environmental Art

Course. That particular performance included Roddy Buchanan and Douglas Gordon. It built a more direct bridge to the art school, which was quite interesting. Towards the end of our time on the committee Doug Aubrey and I decided to form a separate organisation, which we called Event Space. We set Event Space up as a separate organisation with charitable status. The basic aim was to support the type of practices that we were doing ourselves as well as time based work. We were interested in site-specificity and installation work. I guess Projects UK in Newcastle were something of an influence in terms of what they were doing. The precursor to that I should mention was staging a performance by Stuart Brisley at Transmission. I had gone down to Newcastle to see or experience one of his sound works, which was in a terraced house in Newcastle as part of New Work Newcastle 1986. New Work Newcastle was the first of a whole series of events that Projects UK did. Through Projects UK and then meeting Brisley, we managed to convince him to return to performance work after not having done any for several years. That coincided with a large show that we had on at the Third Eye Centre called The Georgiana Collection. We showed the film that we made with Ken McMullen, *Being and Doing*. We returned to another project with Stuart Brisley in 1987, which was the staging of the Cenotaph project in a community venue in Govan. After we did that project with Stuart Brisley, we discussed the notion of doing a festival. We'd been doing screenings and such like in an erratic basis, and they were usually done at the Goethe Institute in Glasgow. The Goethe Institute had always been quite supportive again for what Transmission had been doing. Concurrent with that, the AVE Festival (Audio Visual Experimental), which happened in Arnheim, sent some scouts over to Glasgow. Through that we put together a package of videotapes, which we took to AVE. In the second year of AVE, some of us showed some work as well. That was an interesting model as a festival because they used to send scouts, who were usually young practitioners themselves, to all the respective countries that they wanted to get work from. So they got introduced to whatever was happening there, first-hand with the individuals involved. It helped to facilitate networking with a number of other European media art festivals. Through exposure at events such as AVE, we thought, "Wouldn't it be great to do a festival ourselves in Glasgow?" So it was from that that we developed The New Visions Festival. The first New Visions Festival happened in 1992 and ran in 1994 and 1996. The first festival comprised of 8 local and international programmes of video work that were selected from open submission. So, through the networks that we had with the other festivals, we were able to get information out to makers all over the place. Hundreds of works were included. We had a selection panel of people who were usually artists. We looked at everything and put together packages. We attempted to link up different venues in the city at the time, so we were having screenings at the Goethe Institute and at the GFT (Glasgow Film Theatre). Transmission Gallery in its new space developed a video-tech. With the 1994 festival, there were about 16 mixed programmes called *International Zeitgeist*. Again, it was selected from open submission. But with that second festival, we helped put on a number of different installations: Ewan Morrison at the CCA, Ben Skea at Intermedia, Alice Angus and Charles Anderson at the GFT and a number of other artists at other locations. We used the upstairs of the CCA, to build an environment that we called the Virtual Living Rooms. We commissioned an artist called Euan Sutherland to build some installations, in which the central focus was a TV monitor, on which people could look at longer works that usually had a documentary or campaigning type of theme to them.

ES: When you were at Transmission, you say you were interested in video, moving image and film. Would you say that that was concurrent with the rest of Glasgow or the Scottish Art scene? Was there a large interest in video or was it quite a small community?

MD: I think there was a growing interest in it. The community was quite small and driven by just a handful of individuals. I think that most scenes or communities usually are. I would say however that that was the formative period, which helped to lay the groundwork. Now it is a much richer environment for the production, and potentially the reception of the work. I think there are still a lot of issues however, concerning the work that galleries put on, despite the number of interventions that happened. The interventions were significant but they were not properly acknowledged within the larger institutions. It was only through video filtering through into the larger institutions that it began to get written about in the more mainstream magazines. Through the 80's there was only in major video art show allegedly in Edinburgh, and that was in 1989. That was Marie-Jo Lafontaine at the Fruitmarket. It was a few years after that they then had Marina Abramovich. Significantly however, some Scottish based artists were then shown: Dalziel and Scullion, Smith and Stuart, but the recognition of video was done on the back of artists who already had a reputation in the art world.

ES: Can you talk about Video Positive, Variant and Street Level and how you got involved with them?

MD: The first Video Positive Festival was in 1989. I was still a student at that point, coming to the end of my post-grad. We took some kit down with us and decided that we would try and get some interviews with some of the artists and spokes people who were there at the time. Amongst them were Mike Stubbs, Eddie Berg, Simon Robertshaw, Willem Velthoven from Mediamatic Magazine, Michael Maziere and Anna Ridley. So we undertook interviews, which actually provided very interesting perspectives on the debates taking place around video. I think the question, "What is video to you?" might have been the first question. So we got a lot of interesting definitions emerging out of those interviews. That tape was then edited together to become *Variant Video*. We got some money from Projects UK and with the support of the Television Workshop in Dundee we produced 500 of those tapes, which got some limited distribution. That was at a time when there might have been a possibility to distribute videotapes still. Things were beginning to change at that point with the advent in new technologies, but with the closure of the distribution outlets that might have been able to support such distribution. *Variant Video* was made available with Issue A of Variant, so it had been running for quite a few years already. The parallel tape to that was called *Workers City: The Subversive Past* and that included interviews with 4 writers or activist types. The aim of that was to cover a more radical aspect to Scottish politics and culture. That included Hamish Henderson, John Taylor Caldwell, Farquhar McLay and James D Young. John Taylor Caldwell was an old man then already, he just died recently aged 95. He has donated his body to medical science so there's no funeral. I had a lot of emails from people recently asking me about that tape, wanting to do a screening of it. That was 2 sides the same coin that I was interested in. One was the aspect and the specifics of a particular practice and the other was to do with activism and politics. The intention then was to try and do more videotapes but the

resources weren't there to do them. Having said that, a crew of us went to the Next Five Minutes Festival in Amsterdam and undertook a lot of interviews with media activists and tactical television people like Paul Garrin, David Garcia and Arthur Kroker. We interviewed a whole number of people. All of that stuff still exists in a box somewhere. The other event that we recorded with the aim of doing something with was a major conference in 1990 called Self Determination and Power. The key speakers at that were Noam Chomsky and George Davie. I have passed that project to 3 people so far over the years who've been unable to actually stick with it. There is about 15 hours worth of material. The magazine continued and developed up until issue No 9. It was all hand distributed or by snail mail. It was only thereafter that the Arts Council realised that Variant wasn't going to go away. They gave us £500 to get a phone installed so that they could get in touch and that was the first move. I remember Maggie Bull approaching me about that. We continued to develop that and the Arts Council, eventually after a period of feasibility, awarded us core funding which lasted for a couple of years to do it in that form. It folded in 1994, but coverage of video and film was quite an important feature of the back issues of Variant. Interestingly, it started off with a couple of issues discussing the role of video within the context of The National Review of Live Art. But that developed into later issues. We had a dedicated section, which was Moving Image News and we included a diary of all the international festivals that were coming up. That was part of a community of interest within the sector that was definitely growing around the time of the early 90's. Obviously with the contribution that The Fringe Film and Video Festival in Edinburgh had, New Visions contributed to that quite significantly. It has marked a growing plurality within the practice.

**ES:** Would you say there were any particular debates or opinions that you would agree or disagree with that were coming out of the issues that you were raising?

**MD:** It was more generalised debates that were going on rather than any one particular subject within a discourse. I don't think you could identify one debate over another debate. It was a constituency of makers and a few venues who were interested. Then there was the other side of it, which was more of a campaign than a debate. Earlier however, there was a public fight that emerged round about 1986/1987, when the first Glasgow miracle happened, which was New Image Glasgow. It was a show that was held at the Third Eye Centre, including several painters. It really put the spotlight on Glasgow and Scotland from an international perspective. I guess it was the curator's intention to catch up with the focus on New Figuration that was happening all over Europe at the time and it worked quite successfully. However, there were quite a few practitioners that took exception to the writing and to the attention that was being given to New Figuration at the expense of other developing fields. They sensed that some potential closure could happen on that expansion should it not be contested. So, the Edinburgh Review initiated an exchange of polemics over a course of about three issues. Sandy Moffat and Ken Curry had written one and in response to that, myself and Billy Clark, who had then just got involved with Transmission, basically contested what was said. It ruffled a few feathers and Neil Asherton was recruited to undermine the oppositional voices. He wrote an editorial in the Observer, which was called *The Enterprise and the Cult of Failure*. That was an interesting debate but it was more a conflict than a discussion because it served to attempt to marginalise what Transmission was doing. We were identified with Transmission with all this performance video stuff. But, it did bring out the strength of certain conservative voices

within the Scottish Art establishment. It is quite an interesting period. The writing was questionable from the perspective of now but I think it provoked a lot of attention at the time. Some of the debate around that continued in the letters pages of Variant as well

**ES:** You gained funding at various points and obviously you could always say you would have liked more, but would you say you were generally successful with funding?

**MD:** The intention through initiating projects and trying to start things up was to try and attract the funding to them that would give them the credibility and the sustainability to carry on. It has been successful and it has been a failure with different kinds of projects. Variant faltered because it ended temporarily through the withdrawal of funds, mainly because at that time in 1994, it was the only magazine that was coming out of Scotland. It really wasn't the ambassador that the establishment wanted. There were also other things emerging at the time. There were larger developments that meant it was necessary to move the funding around, but the decisions were political and aesthetic rather than purely financial. New Visions had worked on a project-to-project basis. Transmission, Variant and New Visions were all voluntary activities for which there were very intermittent fees. There was a ground swell in the early 90's to get recognition for both the French Film and Video Festival and for New Visions, but there wasn't enough money to go round. So, the Arts Council and the Film Council initiated a process of improvement whereby the two organisations would look at merging with one another. That process lasted for about 18 months through a bridging grant that was given to the two organisations. At the end of that process, a couple of good reports came out, which were commissioned by the Arts Council. One was to look at the feasibility of a new organisation that would emerge through that bridging process. The other consultancy was to do with setting up an equipment resource to feed that sector in Scotland. One consultancy was undertaken by Clive Gilman and Eddie Berg on the equipment resource, and the other consultancy was undertaken by Positive Solutions, who were also based in Liverpool at the time. Unfortunately the resources required for the equipment side of things were just beyond consideration and how that would be maintained and such like, so it didn't go forward. From the other consultancy the Moving Image Art Agency was set up which then developed and morphed into New Media Scotland. With the emergence of New Media Scotland there was a move away from the traditional festival format and also what might be considered to be traditional towards media art forms, installation and monitor based work in the galleries. That obviously coincided with changes that were happening within the visual art sector as well. The visual arts boom in the early 90's with the YBAs depoliticised practice in many ways and rejuvenated the art market. It affected Scotland quite badly in terms of the new practices that had emerged. Having said that, there was a school of artists who had come through the Environmental Art course who had set up their own structures through Windfall and very cleverly managed to infiltrate the mainstream gallery sector. They then went on to do very well. It was quite interesting because it shifted the lobbying constituency and moved considerations of the practice away from media specificity to the generalised pot of the visual arts. The last New Visions festival that I was involved in was in 1994. After that we did a lot of single screen packages. There were monthly screenings. Flicker also emerged at the same time. That was an open platform for all types of moving image work. It is still running at G-Mac in Glasgow. At that point though, I joined Street Level. Through that I've been able to continue my

interest in the area and get the funding for it.

**SP:** Let's go back to the 80's. What about Pictorial Heroes and other works that got pretty good airing. Have you got any views on their work? They were quite dominant for a while. They were very visible.

**MD:** Pictorial Heroes were quite a force in Glasgow, not just through the combination of the collaborators, Doug Aubrey and Alan Robertson. They certainly had many views about things and were individually quite good polemicists and did quite a lot of writing themselves. So, their practice was quite an interesting one in terms of straddling fine art practice with a political campaigning one, either successfully or unsuccessfully. The way that they have evolved is quite interesting. They went on to do single screen works and then they went their separate ways. One produces works. His main outlet is broadcast. The other works in the commercial sector.

**ES:** Would you say they influenced a lot of people?

**MD:** I don't know if their practice influenced people but certainly their presence did. They were involved in debates. That is something that is different now. You don't have the artistic social forums that you used to get where people enjoyed getting together and having an argument. For various reasons, there's not a focus on that. There may be other reasons for that. But then, you could get almost everyone who was practicing or had a strong notion about how the world should be, into one room at the one time. Things are quite atomised now. They are much more spread out. Certainly Alan Robertson and Doug Aubrey were regular contributors and supporters to Variant. I know that Doug wrote for a number of other magazines as well, so they were quite important to things.

**SP:** It was less direct. It wasn't so much the video work that had an impact. It was the overall sum of what they did and their presence on the scene.

**MD:** Yes, but the work was a part of that as well. There are a couple of issues of Variant on the subject of Video Positive in 1993. There was a special issue. which was done in partnership with Video Positive. It contains some interesting pieces of theory, which tended to mark thinking at that time. Sean Cubitt features within that and Sadie Plant has an article in it. In 1992 we did a special issue, which coincided with the first New Visions festival so there is an article on David Hall alongside an interview with Despite TV, a whole range of European Media Art Festivals reviews and an interview with Big Star In A Wee Picture. So it overlaps between community activism with the conceptual presence of David Hall with broadcasting big mouths like Big Star. It is quite interesting. That mix was what we tried to encourage in New Visions.

**SP:** You could say that you tried to encourage it throughout the course of your career. It can quite often be an uphill battle because these people liked to be within their ghetto. They didn't really engaging in other parallel or oppositional practices. There was a reluctance to do that.

**MD:** Yes, and I would say it's more of a challenge now than it was 20 years ago.



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