



An interview with John Wood and Paul Harrison



A

Portrait by Martin Parr

John Wood and Paul Harrison

Artists John Wood and Paul Harrison are quietly hilarious. Not gaudy, or loud, or in any way extravagant, but subtly comical, ready and very able to suddenly inject humour into considered and intelligent responses to questions about their practice. The pair – who exhibit video and text-based works extensively all over the world, more abroad than at home – have worked closely together since 1993. Over the last two decades they’ve steadily built a body of work that, although mainly constructed within the white walls of their Bristol studio, deals honestly but playfully with the real world – with the turbulent relationships we have with each other, the objects around us, and the built environment we all exist within. In the run up to their show at London’s newly-founded Carrol/Fletcher gallery, *It’s Nice That* met the artists at their studio to talk slapstick, misreadings and bored astronauts on the moon.

INT Firstly, how did you start working together?

JW We both studied in the painting department at Bath [Spa University], but because neither of us were really painters we became aware of each other – you always seem to notice someone who’s being given as hard a time as you are. Even though we were in different years we got to know each other a little, but it was only by chance, after we’d both left the college, that a mutual friend of ours suggested we should meet again.

PH I was doing a residency at the Uppingham School in a really tiny village in Rutland, and one day John just turned up. It was strange at first because, although we knew each other, we’d never really spent

to the galleries that did exist. When you talk to some students today you realise their aim is to be represented by a commercial gallery by the end of the opening night of their degree show. And it may well be easier now – there are far more commercial galleries around, and huge art fairs. The expectation and pressure now is far greater, whereas for us it was more about finding a way to make work. Making work was in itself a success, and we borrowed and stole what we could in order to continue to do so.

JW Video, when we started out, faced a huge amount of snobbery. To some, video was only worthwhile at broadcast quality, but that meant waiting six months to use certain pieces of equipment. That wasn’t

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time together. Suddenly, in this incredibly remote village in central England, we were forced into making performance pieces together and watching a load of terrible films rented from the local video shop.

INT Do you think it would be possible for graduates to do that now?

PH The landscape has changed drastically since then. When we left college there wasn’t a huge emphasis placed on selling work, and we definitely didn’t expect to be immediately represented by a gallery. There were no grand expectations.

JW Especially because we were creating video work. Painters didn’t expect to sell work, and people working with video had even less chance. We thought, “Okay, if we teach for a while, maybe we can spend a little time on our own work.”

PH This was in 1990 – a radically different time to now. There were very few commercial galleries around, and we felt very little relation

what we wanted to do. We wanted to do things there and then – if we needed to borrow a camera we would, and we’d do it immediately, to make the film we wanted to make.

INT Do you think this tendency to borrow – to take whatever was available to you at a particular moment – influenced the type of work you were creating?

PH In the two years leading up to our first piece, *Board* (1993), we developed a kind of vocabulary – a number of agreements about what we would and wouldn’t do – which is still in place to an extent. We work against it now – we do things today that we never would have thought to have done then – but the economy of objects we use in the work has remained.

JW We had more time in those early days to find an object and to mess around with it. We’d spend four days experimenting with step ladders,

for example, or with whatever else we could find. We’d spend time trying stuff out, which allowed us to form a way of working – a system of rules, a logic. Now, because we have more things going on, and because we’re under more pressure, our work has become less about improvisation. The process has become more focussed, and we rely more on drawings to develop ideas.

INT Have you always sketched?

JW Right from day one! Because we lived in different cities, and were only in Rutland together for small periods of time, we would post drawings back and forward. It makes us laugh that we can now produce a sketch and immediately send it via email. Funnily enough, although technology has changed – although we now have email and shoot high-definition video – our work is still incredibly lo-fi. It’s still very similar to how it was in the beginning.

INT Do you remember some of your early intentions? Do you remember those rules you originally set up?

JW One of the first things we agreed on was to always do things in the most straightforward way. Paring things back – creating a sterile environment – means less distraction for the viewer, and allows us to increase the contrast with an event that’s in some way ridiculous or insignificant. It amplifies the action, the strangeness of it.

We also decided – as a kind of anti-filmic technique – to do everything in one shot, from one angle. Of course, the more you work with specific theories the more you realise how they’re flawed, how they need to evolve, how they have their own set of contradictions.

PH A lot of the initial decisions came from the lack of any sort of budget. Because we didn’t have the money to hire performers, we featured in the works ourselves. And because we didn’t have the

money to pay someone to film, we were forced into positioning the camera on a tripod.

Our initial intention – and the reason why we decided to wear semi-identical clothing – was to become generic figures. It never mattered to us who was doing what. The problem with that was that if, in a video, I hit John, or did something that appeared as if I was causing

him some kind of harm, viewers immediately showed sympathy towards him, and hated me.

Some people have misread the work. They think it’s a critique of the white cube, for example. But for us it has always been about making diagrams. Our sketches begin on white paper, and the intention has been, from the beginning, to create those drawings in three dimensions.

INT How else do people misread the work?

JW We found, when we started, that people would watch the videos and find them funny. It was a reaction that genuinely threw us because we were being very serious – we didn’t think it was funny at all.

INT What’s the standard reaction to your videos?

PH “No more, please, stop it...”

JW There’s a whole range. On the one hand, video has a bad reputation. People sometimes react

negatively to the idea of a show of video work, but, having seen it, tell us they enjoyed it. Equally, though, video has a whole load of advantages – all of us deal with screens of different kinds everyday.

PH It’s a language people now understand, and it’s a relationship people perhaps don’t have with painting. We grew up as part of the first generation to experience pop videos, so we’ve always been very used to them. We’re specifically used to a standard length of video being around three minutes, and many of our videos are around that





length. Not only has there been an economic use of sets and objects in our work, but also of time.

JW We talk a lot about old slapstick films because of the way they were often made up of short sections. Films by Jacques Tati and Laurel & Hardy were, in effect, small events pieced together.

INT How important, as influences, are comedy acts like Laurel & Hardy, or Morecombe and Wise?

PH People have a tendency to think of Buster Keaton as an influence because he's a more credible reference. But for me, Laurel & Hardy have been more important. I didn't first see Keaton until I was much older, but, while I was growing up, Laurel & Hardy were always on BBC2. I remember recording bits – particular pratfalls – and watching them over and over and over again.

The problem for some people viewing the work – and especially for people writing about it – is that there are a lot of references involved. Some will be considered, and some will be unintentional, but so much has filtered in. It's all in there at the same time.

JW As much as we look at slapstick films, we also look at mainstream Hollywood films, and of course we look to painting and sculpture and many other things. Much of this looking has been to do with trying to figure out our own version of things – to really try to under-

stand the relationship between things.

PH These things are rare though. Because there's two of us, and we understand how each other works, there's a lack of preciousness over ideas. It doesn't matter who comes up with the most ideas, or what we consider to be the better ideas, or whose ideas get taken forward. Drawings can be made very quickly – if we don't like something, we'll turn to something else.

INT How does one idea get selected over another?

JW We use a practical method of decision making, but even now things happen very naturally, often by luck or by impulse. 98 per cent of the time, if one of us puts a drawing on the table, we'll both know whether or not it's something we want to do. Of course there are moments when one of us is unsure of an idea, but on those occasions the idea often becomes quite fun – we tend to do it anyway, not really knowing what's going to happen.

PH The other thing is we've started doing non-video work. There are so many other things that can be done within the structure of another medium, like the text-based work, or the *500 Drawings* project we're now working on.

INT Have your drawings ever been exhibited alone? Are the ideas

“We made a video last year that had a tent in it – for ten years Paul's been pushing for the inclusion of a tent in a piece of work...”

stand the relationship between things.

PH The physicality of Morecombe and Wise is beautiful – the subtle movements, the glances off screen, the timing of it all... We take things from those moments, while also taking things from films. No matter how bad a film is, there's always one little thing that's worth something. I tell students to watch television – to study the craft of it – because the people behind those programmes really know how to make stuff.

INT Working as a pair, does the question of ownership ever come up? Are there ever arguments over specific ideas?

PH After we made our first few videos we always had the feeling we had to work together. It felt incredibly natural. And because there are two of us we immediately lost the idea of the single ego. Working in a pair gives you a soundboard – there is always someone to test an idea out on.

JW Occasionally one of us will argue the case for an idea the other isn't sure about, and we'll enter into a long period of negotiation that sometimes lasts for years. We'll keep slipping an idea onto the table, trying to wear the other down. We made a video last year that had a tent in it – for ten years Paul's been pushing for the inclusion of a

tent in a piece of work.

PH They're crucial in terms of the process, and we have shown them before, to help people make links between ideas and the works as videos. We like the idea of revealing our process, but we haven't done it too much, partly because a lot of them are in sketchbooks.

JW Because we've always drawn, they seem to us to be a very normal part of our activity. Sketches are primarily working drawings used to make a video, but within some you notice things you feel could stand on their own. In the last few years there have been a few occasions where we've realised we're trying to force a particular idea into video form, but that video isn't the most appropriate medium. Sometimes, the drawing is enough in itself.

INT Why, after 20 years of concentrating on video work, have you started to branch out into other mediums?

PH It's always something we've wanted to do, and now, because we're asked to create bigger shows, with not just one room but six, we have the opportunity. After three rooms of video, the viewer needs work the eye can rest on, things that use a different medium, that shifts tone and plays off the video works.

INT Is the process the same?

PH The text-based works are a lot quicker to make, and they're fun. Videos take huge amounts of time...

INT Editing is such a laborious process...

JW And then there's things like lighting the set and sweeping the floor out... Videos take so long that, in order to retain a kind of sanity, we need to create things that are relatively quick and immediate. But these works are an extension of what we've been doing anyway – there's this whole other load of stuff we've always wanted to explore, but which isn't quite right for video.

INT In terms of the content, does it work in the same way? Does it come from the same place?

PH We have a list – we actually have lots of lists, lists of lists – but one particularly is a list of phrases we've sent each other via email, or taken from sketchbooks. These form the basis of the text works, but could also form the structure of a video. The way we work with text illustrates the way we approach our work as a whole: we mix the extremely banal and the poetic, always playing with tone.

INT Are you now trying to make people laugh?

PH Laughter isn't crucial. It's nice if it gets that particular response, but it's also nice to get a mixture of different responses. The initial aim, as we said, was for people to actually watch the work. That in itself is response enough.

JW We've always wanted to make videos that we'd want to watch, so within the films there's stuff we think is funny, but there are also things we think are very sad. They're reflections on what we're finding interesting at a given moment in time. An ex-student of mine recently came out of a show of ours and said he'd never realised how melancholic the work was. I don't necessarily think it is, but his reaction is still a reflection on us – we don't come into the studio for eight hours a day and laugh.

PH Even when we're not featured in the work, the viewer can still get a sense of our relationship with the physical world, and that can be funny or it can be tragic or melancholic. The work is very much about how we, as individuals, relate to other people, or to objects, or to the built environment.

INT Can we talk about one of your latest videos, *Astronauts*?

PH The idea came from the fact that, as a human, you can go to the most exciting place in the world – the moon in this case – and

find out that, actually, it's a little bit dull. It relates to any sense of expectation, to buying something or being somewhere and feeling slightly let down. We made it off the back of another video that involved a hugely detailed set and an incredibly complex structure. It was an opportunity to hire a couple of space suits, and to improvise within a fairly simple structure.

JW We had one particularly surprising reaction to *Astronauts*. A man, having seen it, told us he didn't really like our work as a whole because he much preferred work that related to real life. It's a fair reaction – he's allowed to react in that way – but to us it seemed so strange because this film – all of our work – is so much about a representation of the world, of real life. Obviously it's all filmed in a studio, not outside on a road somewhere, but it's still so much about what it means to be human, about what happens when you fall over or get bored or bump your head.

The good thing about these sort of reactions is that they make you consider the work in a new way, or, at least, they force you into thinking very hard about it. I once did a talk during which a pensioner began to berate me, she was so angry. To her our work wasn't art. It required, in her opinion, absolutely no skill to make. She thought we were messing around, which is sort of true. [Laughs]

INT How much of the content is directly taken from your own real life experiences?

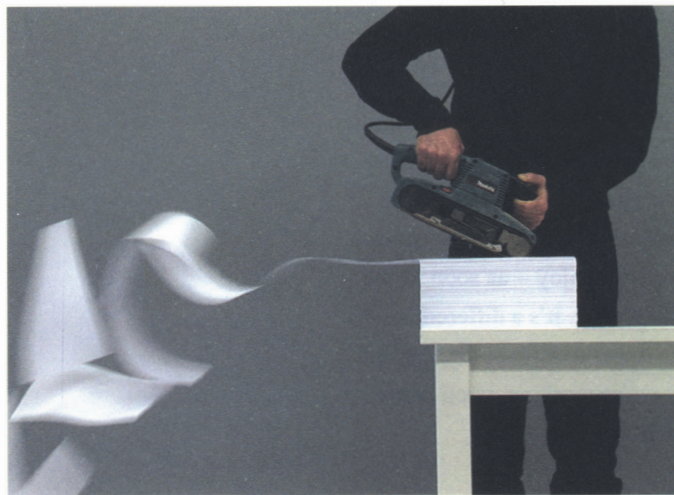
PH There's one piece that comes to mind specifically, *Plastic Bag*, from 2001, in which I'm filmed swinging a plastic bag around

and around. While driving out of Brighton I spotted a man – not at all a young man – swinging a bag around his head. It was just this beautiful image. There are lots of things we see out and about that feed in.

JW We steal things from absolutely everywhere. In a film, like we said, there'll be a tiny bit – a neon light turning on or a stack of bricks outside in a street – that you can take and use. And then there's all the auto-biographical things: small incidents or objects we experience that don't matter to the viewer – the viewer has no way of understanding the links we sometimes make – but which add layers to the work for us.

INT What lies beyond the very immediate layers of your work?

PH For me, good art is the stuff that's very, very open; that suggests things but which leaves the viewer with a lot of work to do; that allows them to interpret the work in the way they perhaps want to. Whilst having a great deal of respect for the work, I'm less attracted



to art that tries to impart knowledge in a very direct way. In some ways we ourselves try to impart knowledge, but it's completely useless knowledge. We show people what happens when you take a belt sander to a stack of paper, for example. The important thing is to make sure the work is open enough for people to react to it in whichever way they like – emotionally, intellectually, however...

JW Strangely, although you'd imagine that by stripping the work to its bare minimum you'd narrow the number of possible responses, the work becomes multi-layered.

INT The more space there is, the more the viewer can fill...

JW Yes, people can then interpret things in so many different ways, and can also respond in ways we can't control.

PH Sometimes extravagant claims can be made on behalf of a piece of work, and you look at the press releases and think, "Really? Is that really what it means?" Sometimes it's very simply about allowing the viewer to respond.

INT How do you define yourselves?

JW Good looking.

PH Suave. [Laughs]

JW We're artists, although it doesn't really matter how we define ourselves because you're defined externally. Essentially we're doing the most interesting mixture of things we think we could be doing.

PH We take what we do very seriously, but we've said since the beginning that as soon as we stop doing things we enjoy – as soon as we stop having fun – we'll know it's time to get out. It's a different kind of enjoyment now. When we first began it was a brilliant kind of fun – we were purely playing around. Now we're working much harder, but the fun has begun to feel much, much more rewarding.

John Wood and Paul Harrison: *Things That Happen is on at the Carroll/Fletcher gallery until 30th March. Their DVD, Nothing Special, is published by Lux.*

A. Notebook, 2008

B. 10 × 10, 2011

C. Unrealistic Mountaineers, 2012

D. One More Kilometre, 2009

E. 10 × 10, 2011