



REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70's & 80's Interview with Kevin Atherton

Interview by Dr Jackie Hatfield, Thursday 21st July 2005

JH: Which of your works involving video do you consider to be the most important and why?

KA: There are a number of works produced around about the mid-eighties. Having just looked at it again, after a period of years, I think *Television Interview*, which is me interviewing *Coronation Street*, is a significant piece of work. It reveals a lot about the debate that was going on then between video art and television. It is literally an interview of television by video, and I think it stands the test of time. It works formally as a two-monitor piece between me as a rather aggressive interviewer, interviewing one episode of *Coronation Street* and all the cast. It's interesting to watch it now to think how Jack Duckworth is still in the programme and how Ivy Tildersley has gone. But a lot of the questions that the piece asks, and a lot of the questions in the piece, are relevant and still relevant to the relationship between fine art, and a broader public. It's media specific in that it is about video and television, but a lot of those issues are about who are the audience for art. It touches on things that I'm still interested in: about bursting the bubble, about 'you have to be informed in order to get this'. If you watch *Coronation Street* or you are familiar with television you will get *Television Interview*. It was commissioned by the *Arts Council of Great Britain* for the *British Art Show II* and it toured. It began at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham and it went to Edinburgh, Southampton and somewhere else. There were four venues. It was seen within the context of what was going on with British Art then. What was going on with British Art then, isn't any more. With a revival of painterly painting, all those guys up in Scotland who were on everybody's lips there like (Stephen?) Campbell. What happened to him? So it was quite interesting. Of the people using video in that show, that piece was the only video installation. There were tapes by people like Rose Finn-Kelcey and Mick Hartney, etc. in the tape section.



JH: Would you say that *The Eleventh Hour* was an important piece?

KA: Yes, I think that was important, because with that piece, at that time, I thought then, and I think even more-so now looking at it, that what I was trying to do, was use the critical distance that video art permitted and gave me to look at television. If one was a critic and used a different language, to allow me to critique television, I was taking the piss out of broadcast culture. I was trying to merge the two. That was a shift from in the earlier days of coming from a more sculptural, and more fine art point of view, and saying to myself, and saying to the audience, 'Don't think of television when you look at this. Just because you look through the same frame, don't have the same expectation'. I did those works at the beginning in the early eighties. In the mid to late seventies I made more formal video installations and video performances where I was talking about video art more as sculpture. Then the pressure built up and built up,

maybe it was happening within me anyway, until I thought it was unfair to say to the audience 'Forget the frame'. I wanted them to think of the frame as television and not to have these two things separated. Within a British context, it is almost a Reithian notion of high and low culture. I wanted the two to come together. *Coronation Street* was like two monitors, one video, one TV, one episode of *Coronation Street*. He's knocking on the glass. He is trying to bring these two worlds together. Then for *The Eleventh Hour* I did five short interviews that were edited throughout the programme of video art. I was looking at the audience and saying 'Now this question is for you at home' and appealing to interview the viewer by listening for their response, so that I set up the illusion that something was going on between me and the viewer. I set up the illusion that I was coming through the TV screen into the viewers' living room. If the question is 'Which are the important works?' I think that was an important work. There were a lot of works around then in the 80s, like *Stand Up TV*, where there was a blank TV with a microphone going up to it. I think that talks a lot about the way television fetishises the notion of personality. I think it pre-empts what was to happen in the 90s with *YBA*'ism, where artists were permitted or encouraged even, to put their personality first. It's and as if artists before the 90s didn't have personalities. In the 80s what I was trying to do was to integrate and question notions of the artist and who he or she might be and how to manipulate that within a work. But I was doing it through using a blank monitor. I was using my voice as if the TV had a personality. All of this was resisting the notion that art just provided more content for TV. Putting video art on television had to be different than putting a programme on Francis Bacon on television because the space between video art and television, and the similarity of the frames for it, were so close that I wanted something to happen. I wanted them to merge or interweave or have a kind of discourse. It wasn't saying inherently the galleries were wrong, but it was about trying to subvert them and link them with other spaces. I don't know don't want to get totally wrapped up in class, but I think a lot of it is to do with class. I was brought up with television, having been born in 1950. I remember the telly coming to the house. We must have got a television in 1958 or 1959. I remember other kids in the street coming into our house because we had a telly and prior to that we were going to other people's houses. It was BBC black-and-white and then there was ITV and all of that. I remember the advent of television. I don't know if this isn't just nostalgia but I think it made the world of difference. It's a class issue I think. I tried to keep video separate from TV but every bloody part of me couldn't keep those two parts of my life separate. I thought 'No, there is a relationship with TV include it within the work. Don't separate it.' Not to forget that, because the formal things were very interesting. It's a constant in what I do, whatever medium I use. I'm a sucker for using frames within frames. I think it's a painterly device. It's something that the Greeks used; the painting within the painting, and that theatrical Frankie Howard thing of the off-stage remark about being in the play. It's like being in the dramatic production and saying your lines and then turning to the audience and going 'Not a titter!', then going back into the thing. It is about that. Last weekend I saw a show in The National Gallery here in Dublin of William Orpen, who is somebody I'd not thought about much, but he is very clever and he is doing that all the time. He is referring to the edge of the frame. He is looking out at the viewer looking in. He is referencing Manet, with the *Folies-Bergere*. He is looking at all of that playing with mirroring and stuff. That's a constant in what I do. It's still rooted in a wanting to be at the threshold at which the work is experienced by the audience, wanting and being unwilling to hand the product over to somebody else to mediate it. It is being unable to resist being on that edge between its consumption and its production. No two things being together. Wanting to

tweak it. Wanting to be there when the audience get it. Wanting to make that smooth sometimes and them wanting to disrupt it. Wanting to add another layer to it. Wanting to re-enter it and spill it all out again or put it together in a way that's different because it's been revisited. It's coming out of, what I think is, the essence of Fluxus. The thing never is static. It never stops. It's never over. You can't draw a line on it. It is, in a way, like being resistant now, twenty or thirty years later from the first tape I ever made, being resistant now to draw a line under that, box it up and say 'That's it, product', because the very reason for being involved in the first instance, was that it wasn't like that, it was never over. It's a process performance. It's about re-animating and re-activating. Making the 'now' whenever the 'now' is, now the point. I was involved in a lot of performance work in the 70s and up into the 80s. and they were about not making the audience feel that something happened, and now I've got an invitation after the event. It is wanting the audience, whenever that is, in the 'now' to feel that 'This is it. I'm at the party. Not the little party after the big party, this is the party, whenever that is, and I'm here at the right moment' like it's primary. Welcome to the party. This is the party now. I think about the *In Two Minds* performance, which I began in the 70s, and it in itself is similar to the film pieces I did when I was a student in Leeds, such as the film piece where I made a three-minute 16-millimetre film of myself as a boxer, wearing gloves and nice yellow shorts. I boxed no one. I gave blows, but I also took the blows. I projected that as a three-minute performance. Then live, to a life size projected image, boxed myself. At one point I'm taking a hiding, he is pushing me off the screen, and then I make a come back. There is one punch that really I did have to rehearse, and I get him right in the face, and he jumps out of frame. That, in structure, is very similar to *In Two Minds*, which I would be invited to do a performance of in a gallery or in an art college. If the talk was in the afternoon, I would turn up in the morning. If the talk was at two o'clock; in the morning I would make a video recording of questions. I would put the recording in the audience. Often the monitor would be put on a chair amongst the audience, then at two o'clock, when the lecture had been advertised, I would be introduced. I would stand at the front and I would say to the audience 'Are there any questions?' Somebody would press 'play' and a rather aggressive version of me would then start asking me questions, with gaps so I could respond. I did that in Dublin. I did it in Belfast. I did it in Farnham. I did it in all of these places, but each time made a tape. So in Dublin, nearly 30 years ago, when I did it; I would make reference to maybe the weather or an exhibition or something that was current. That was another thing; the difference between video and film. You didn't have to wait for a couple of days for it to come back from processing. So I have this animated discussion with an earlier version of myself, the earlier version being only a couple of hours ago. Looking at that, it's a video piece, but it lead to a performance piece called *Any Questions*. I used to do this piece when I would be invited to art schools. I'd arrive at the art school and the person who'd got me in to do the talk would be looking at me as if to say, 'where are your slides?' I'd have nothing, not a thing, no preparation. I would stand in front of an audience. I would sit in front of an audience. I would ask the tutor in the college to do the introduction: 'And today we have performance and video artist Kevin Atherton here to give us a talk', just to set it up. Then I would come out to the front of the lecture theatre. It worked best the more formal the lecture theatre was. If it was a kind of tiered lecture theatre, it was great. I would sit at the front of the lecture theatre, fold my arms, look at the audience and just say, 'Are there any questions?' and look around the room and wait for somebody to ask a question. Somebody almost inevitably would ask a question, it will be a general question and I would answer it. We would go on for an hour and be conscious of the

time. It would go on for an hour to the point when I sensed people had forgotten how the performance began. In the way that I would respond to them, I'd make them ask better questions and more specific questions to what was going on. Then after an hour I would go, 'That's it, it's over', like it had stopped. People would be slightly surprised at that, 'Oh yeah that's how it started'. I would stop it, and then go, 'Are there any questions about the previous hour?' I swear a different kind of person would then start asking questions. All the art historians, I always reckoned that because it was over, they felt safe to ask questions. They would start asking questions outside of the piece, where they would be going 'When you set it up by saying: "Are there any questions?" did you anticipate that you would get those?' So we had a performance within a performance. It keeps on going. Some performances have aspects of it and some sculptures and the video. What's interesting, certainly within the British Art World, is that it's almost like I have three audiences, certainly have two audiences. Some people know the time based work, the video stuff and performance, while other people know the sculpture things, but I have problems, because of media hierarchies or people belong to one camp rather than another and go 'Oh God you made that! I didn't know that!' It's interesting. It's revealing. You have to sign up to one camp.

JH: I suppose it is how to read it. I said the same thing when I knew that you'd done the *Brixton* pieces. I would never have associated you with those pieces, until hearing the way that you think about them, which is time based, because they are. As soon as I understand that, of course I don't see that that's any different, conceptually from the video works on TV or the gallery works. So conceptually, they are very clearly your works. I think it's just about the reading of them and that certain audiences understand certain things.

KA: Yes. It being bronze isn't incidental, it's central to it, particularly given that two of the people are black and one person is white, but of course they are all bronze. So it integrates into it, because it's Brixton. It's not Cheltenham. Maybe that's wrong to say that about Cheltenham, but there's a difference. Also they are permanent. They have to be there. It is not a piece that is turned on or off. It's an ongoing installation. The time base is organised by British Rail, or Southern Rail, or whoever it is, by the scheduling of the trains. That performance, I don't have to do. But the piece is positioned so it focuses on that time base. Of course, I don't feel as though I'm being a different person, doing the bronze to doing a performance, to doing video work, to doing this interview, it is the same.

JH: Are there works that are important to you in the development of your practice, but are not necessarily more widely acknowledged as important by external viewers?

KA: If you are bitter and twisted and middle aged you could go, 'Fucking all of it you bastards!' I don't now. It's funny. You would think that as you do more work, you might have a growing reputation, so people would take more attention of things. Maybe sometimes, it's not so bad that you wallow in obscurity and are able to be self-indulgent and feel sorry for yourself. But, for example, for the *Video Times* piece, the booklet and video was a major bloody production. It was about cataloguing using the television guide in relationship to the television. I think it was a good piece of work and it has within it, audience reading and watching at the same time. I worked at the Ikon Gallery with Vivian Lovell, when she worked there, I did that piece and it was at the Ikon Gallery for five weeks, as an installation every day. Similarly, when it went to

Kettles Yard in Cambridge. Not a single word was ever written about that piece. I know this is grumpy old man-ish to say it, but I remember doing it, and getting some Arts Council funding to do it because the book had to be done properly. It was properly lit and properly shot but at the end of it all, at the end of both of those shows, I was thinking 'Did I just dream that?' I don't think in the end it does you very much good. It's like you go through things, 'Was what I've just made so awful, that the critics were actually protecting me by not writing about it?' People were writing, but to be honest, you make choices and if you tell too many people at the Arts Council to 'Fuck off' then you pay for it. And I, as a personality took a stance because I was unwilling to compromise. So you live with those consequences. But with work that was shown within galleries, for example with the Ikon Gallery and Kettles Yard, if you had an exhibition of paintings or sculptures within that gallery, then you would get a review because the gallery got reviewed. Critics would go and review it. So, in answer to the question: no, there weren't many, if any, video critics. But, there were gallery critics. They would have come because while I was downstairs in the basement, there was a show upstairs, which was reviewed. They didn't know how to respond, I don't think. It's interesting going back to the question you asked earlier about significant pieces of work, there is a piece that I did at the Serpentine, which was to build on the lawn a frame. That was a show that was fraught with tensions between me, and the gallery. It wasn't a physical difficulty. The difficulty was between myself, and the Director of the gallery. I'd been invited to do a piece of work on the lawn. This was after Brixton, and other quite big pieces that I'd done. It's similar to video art on television, trying to make this moment, the moment. So I addressed the site, but not in a casual way, not going 'OK, here is a lawn outside of the Serpentine which happens to be in Kensington Gardens, in Hyde Park.' If I had done a piece of garden sculpture because it was a park, then I don't think there would have been a problem. What I did, and the only way I could come up with an idea for it, was to think of the relationship between the outside of the gallery and the gallery. So I rebuilt in I-Beam Steel the west gallery and cast a visitor to the gallery, in bronze, holding a catalogue behind his back. I put him up against the wall, which of course wasn't there and he was looking out at the world. I put a builders developers board next to it, which credited everyone, and that started a whole scenario with some Lord. Let's call him Lord Tossplot. He travelled to Hyde Park on his way to the House of Lords every day, and he also happened to be on the Board of Trustees for the Serpentine. Questions were asked in the House of Lords about why are they are building a building in Kensington Gardens? They don't have the right to. When they do a sculpture show, they don't have to get planning permission, but this looked like a building. It was meant to look like a building. Lord Tossplot asked questions in the House of Lords and then he rang the Serpentine and the Director of the Serpentine, instead of saying 'Yes', he was asked, 'Why are you building a building?' He said, 'No it's not a building, it's a sculpture.' Then Lord Tossplot said, 'Yeah but it looks like a building'

'No, it's a sculpture that is meant to look like we are building something'

'OK, what's the Developers Board for?'

'Well the Developers Board credits the people who put money in to make this happen.' There was no Arts Council money. It was British Rail. It was a steel stockholder, Rowen from the Midlands who paid for all of that steel work. Then Lord Tossplot says, 'But it makes the piece look as if it's a building'

'Yes it's meant to'

So they took the bloody board away. I was away on holiday. They took the developers board away, but before they did they took a photograph of it, put it in a frame, staked it

into the grass next to the steel structure saying: 'We apologise but because of pressure from Lord Tossport we had to remove the Builders Developers Board because it looks too much like a Builders Developers Board and makes this sculpture look like we are building a building.' Then somebody stole the bloody thing in the frame, and not a single fucking word was written in the art press. There was a review of it in the *Architects' Journal*. So was I pissed off? You bet I was! For this dimensionalist art-work to happen, whether it's happening with video, or it's a performance where it goes on and on, people have got to get it. You've got to deposit it with other the people like the audience at Farnham with Are there any questions? It really was like, fucking hell, there's no way out of this art-work now. You've done it to us and if you enter the piece, if you get it, it unfolds. It is about itself in that one piece was about videotape broadcast or one piece was about bronze placed in a public space, or a particular public space a railway station. But when it works, it's transformative. It changes. It animates that situation into, 'Oh Christ! It's happening now.' If you can do that on television through the screen, then it's like something magic has happened. Ken Dodd did a thing where there was a TV programme in the 70s or 80s, a kind of Jim'll Fix It for adults. Some not very funny guy wanted to be a comic, he was a blue coat or a red coat at Butlins, and he was taken to visit Spike Milligan etc. Whether you like Ken Dodd or not, he understands the mechanics stand-up humour because he's been doing it forever. He also understands television. So he was talking to this guy, in Ken Dodd's house, and he was telling this guy, 'Look you're going to be on stage in Blackpool, but it's being televised, so what you've got to be aware of is the television. Stop! Will you stop? A kid's going to knock that cup and saucer over in a minute!' This went out on a Sunday afternoon, and I swear in thousands of living rooms, there would have been a kid crossing the room, being perilously close to the cup and saucer on their arm of the armchair. There was no kid in our house, but I was watching it and it animated my living room. Ken Dodd knew and understood it. He did something transformative to recognise that you were watching.

JH: How were the works produced in terms of the aesthetic considerations relating to the technology and the funding?

KA: Initially, certainly, there was an almost desperate sense of, 'How do you get this to work?' Scrambling around on your hands and knees, getting hot, sweaty and dirty with five pieces of equipment, asking, 'Does this lead go in this?' transformers, batteries, you needed a bloody army to set it all up. Not being technically predisposed, any attempts that I made were lucky if the camera was level. But actually through having once being a painter, and being quite conscious of the frame, thinking it was important how it looked and how it was framed, the very first video tape that I made, which I have on a reel-to-reel tape, was called *Tape Tape*. I made it tape in 1975. I'd just moved to London. I made it at Battersea Arts Centre. The cameraperson was a guy called Dave Hanson, a friend of mine, that was at Leeds with me. We set up all this equipment on a Saturday and it was set up pointing at a window. It was Georgian sash window in Battersea Arts Centre looking out down Latchmere Road, with poplar trees in the distance. We set it up so that the window was the frame within the frame. Indebted to Rene Magritte, it was like those pictorial devices of frames within frames and being in that picture but looking out as well. William Orpen did that in his exhibition in Dublin at the National Gallery recently. Incidentally, my first job in London was as a packer delivery boy. I was 24 but I worked in a warehouse packing handkerchiefs into boxes. Then I delivered them to places like Harrods, but I spent a lot of the day with tape,

taping boxes up. So this first tape that I made, we set up all the pieces of equipment, framed it so it looked good, and then just let the half hour tape run. I'd been to a painting and decorating shop and I'd bought half a dozen rolls of masking tape. It was painterly, coming from being at one stage, an art student painting hard age paintings like Barnett Newman or Frank Stella. I taped up the window using the masking tape and I blocked out the light. It was as interesting as watching paint dry. So I did this half hour thing, where I had my back to the camera. I'd taped up the whole window and the light levels got lower. Then at the end of the half an hour, I remember saying to Dave Hanson 'Did we get it?' like the miracle of video tape where you don't have to wait 24 hours to go to the processor 's, we played it back and it was ghostly. We both fucking jumped. Of course it had recorded the sound and we were trying to work out, 'Bloody hell! How did that happen?', because there wasn't a microphone. We didn't have a separate microphone. It had recorded the image but it had sound as well. Because I'd had my back to the camera, there was the bitchiest conversation between myself and Dave Hanson. We were tearing the art world to shreds during the recording, which was a fairly boring procedure. I'd go, 'Jesus! The work of so-and-so and so-and-so!' and it's all on the tape. It was like it was supernatural! The way we responded at it was like we'd just had a séance and somebody had moved the glass. It was spooky. We were asking how the hell it did that? It was a big difference from film in its immediacy, 'Did it work?' 'Can we go to the pub?' 'Did we get it?' 'Yes we did!' Then the really funny thing about this conversation was that it wasn't cautious at all because we didn't think it was being recorded. That was the first piece.

JH: You've used a lot of text in some of the video works. Could you talk about that?

KA: Because I like performing, and I like language, and I like talking, the *Video Times* piece, which has the minute by minute, second by second, description of what's going on, on the screen, the viewer is required to read this description and watch the monitor at the same time. On the monitor there is a figure, watching you, watching the television. So, it would go: 'six-thirty close up, a drastic edit to a close up of his eyes that fill the screen. Viewers with a nervous disposition are advised not to watch.' It was Orwellian *Big Brother* stuff. What I think I'm quite good at, if one's allowed to say you're good at anything, is formats. Taking a format and mimicking it so that the writing parodies things like the *TV Times*: 'a splendid evening's entertainment' or 'scratches right eyebrow with right hand, moody.' It's parody of a lot of it, and it's being aware of format. A big influence, although it's not visual, has been Flann O'Brien. From when I first read Flann O'Brien when I was nineteen or something, he is so playful in relationship to the reader and particularly in his *Irish Times* column. I'm too young to remember them for real, but people here in Dublin remember them appearing in the *Irish Times*. They were all collected and published by *Picador* I think, but within the column, you don't get it in the books, he is often saying: 'Your man down bellow' and he is referring to say the art and cultural correspondent who is below his column. So he is aware of where he is on the sheet of newspaper. It's almost like, 'Oh my God. Something has happened to the paper.' It transforms the reading situation. There's something that comes from being a kid from the Isle of Man, where my parents ran guest houses, or boarding houses they were called then. In the last one they had, finally my mother made it to the promenade, to the prom. We had a house on the prom, 40 guests all packed in. if anybody asked for a bath they were considered awkward. But the bonus of that was that posters would go up in the hall for various live shows. At the end of the year you got complimentary tickets to go to a variety show,

with a tiller girl, stand-up comics, singers etc. and one guy who was Karma - The Lightning Hypnotist. I saw him every year. And every year, his test, his way of checking out the audience was getting everybody in the audience to put their hands on the back of Some people would then take their hands off and they couldn't do it. He'd hypnotised them. They would go up on stage, and from them he'd select them. One embarrassing year I pretended that I couldn't and got up. I got as far as the stage before, 'off!' He just weeded people out. He knew straight away. God he was fantastic. I saw a thing on television recently with Ardal O'Hanlon doing a thing onstage. It was an act in the first 4 or 5 minutes to do with how big the stage was. He was saying, 'I'm not going over there.' It was absurd. 'I'm never going over there. I'm going to stay here. I can't go over there because I'm here because I can't be there because I'm here and if I went over here I'd be up.' It was utterly existential in just taking the bare ingredients and the absurdity of one person in front of a thousand others in a theatre, making them have a nervous response called laughter to what he was drawing attention to. Initially, in setting up the act by just using the basics of it. Good comics do that. There's a part of stand-up comedy that has a chauvinistic male thing to it, but this is a device of a one-person audience just making it reflect on itself so it explodes. You're laughing at laughing. You're laughing at the absurdity of the possibility of one person making a thousand other people laugh in a theatre. There's something really nice about that.

JH: When and why did you start making work with video?

KA: My work with video came out of having previously worked with film. I worked with film at Leeds College of Art where I made films that I often then interacted with, or performed with, pitching the live against the recorded. Questioning which was real and which wasn't real like the boxing film that I made. They were films that sometimes were dual projection, where one thing was occurring in one screen and then it occurred on the other. So it seemed a natural progression. Video was cheaper for a start, and you didn't have the processing costs, but it came out of that first tape I made, which was *Tape Tape*, literally made using masking tape recorded on to videotape. I used it as a bolt, within installation and as a counterpoint to a live performance. I think I was attracted to video, I'm attracted to time-based media in the same way that there's something about metal that's forgiving. You can revisit it and heat it up and hit it. There's a moment in bronze casting, even though I've done lots of things with bronze, I know the big guy who actually does it himself, where things are in a state of fluidity, in flux. In the same way that poring bronze is dangerous because the material is between states, it's molten before it cools, there's something very intense about the casting process and it's like the recording or performing process. It's like 'here we go I'm working with an audience.' It is like being prepared to go into free fall and you're falling, you're falling and you've got the first gag, you've got the first laugh rather and you're flying. If you don't get it you can hurt yourself, you can fall on your face. But, being prepared to take risks, there's something about video in that.

JH: But there's a moment at which it becomes finite though, or isn't there? Are you're saying that it's always in flux?

KA: Well there is a moment where it's recorded, now it's digitally, it is there. It's burnt. Almost with me its like 'he will not let it lie', because one's never a hundred per cent satisfied with anything, any recording, any performance, any piece. Because it's time-

based, you can go back and revisit it, not necessarily pick at it, but go back and reanimate it, re-enter it or re-do it and re-record it. Or as time goes by, re-stage it completely. Do it as a 54 year-old man rather than as a 24 year-old man. It would be a different piece so it couldn't just be a matter of recreating a work for archival purposes, I wouldn't do that. I couldn't resist the notion of incorporating the 30 years into it because whether I like it or not the 30-year gap is incorporated into it anyway. Look at my head. I've lost my hair. Age took its toll. The material is also me. The material is, whether I like it or not, heading to death. It's getting older.

JH: Do you think that works that were intervening, succeeded in interjecting a question asking: 'Hang on a minute, look, watch this' in the way that you were trying to make the audience aware of what they were watching? Do you think that was unusual for television works at that time, what artists were doing?

KA: I think there were some very significant seminal pieces like Jan Dibbets's work. I never experienced it in a Dutch household, but the hearth appearing on the TV unannounced, the fact it was unannounced is crucial. Although I never experienced them directly on my TV, but also David Hall's Scottish TV things where he filled the screen with water etc. Then there was Danny Blanchflower on *This is Your Life*, oh no it fucking isn't. That made me aware as a child of how real television was when something went wrong. But what disappoints is the kind of complicity with which artists, who one thought were taking a stance against mediation by broadcast, were falling over one another to become the subject of television. That evening at the ICA, it was odd to watch, there were artists, who previously might have said things about the importance of the primary experience of their work, being very eager panel members to discuss their work in a kind of *South Bank Show* type way. They suddenly became a bit like I am now. But it seemed wrong in that context where there was the opportunity to test the format rather than to compete with content. It was like 'television's wrong unless I am on it, let me on it and I will just provide more content.' and honestly, it could be the weather, it could be the fishery news, it could be art. Unless it's touching the fabric of television itself it's like it was, and it continues to be a missed opportunity. It doesn't imitate TV. It doesn't make the viewer aware of what's happening.

JH: How involved did you get as an artist in the process of making and editing the work?

KA: With the editing, initially there wasn't any. It was like 'and how long was the tape? Half an hour.' That was how long you got when you bought the tape, so things were one tape. The materiality of it decided its end and beginning. Editing came in later on but I am ashamed to admit it. I remember I did a project with Weis Smals and Josine van Droffelaar at the De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam. The project was to make five TV commercials for Netherland 1, a Dutch television channel. But there was a terrible tragedy. They died in a light aircraft crash. We'd got as far as making one of the tapes, which was never broadcast. I made one ad and it was an ad for water. It was one of a series of five, where the product was never mentioned. That was before designer water. It seemed appropriate to Holland, a country where they've been trying to keep this stuff out for generations. I worked with a proper television commercial production company and we shot the first one in Amsterdam. I'd been introduced to the director and I remember being directed. He said to me: 'You want to buy three things' - a director's viewfinder, I didn't do that I didn't have the money, a stopwatch, which I did buy and a book called *The Grammar of the Film Language*, which has got very graphic

images, mainly of large-breasted women. There was no need for these women. But it does show you about two-camera shoot, single camera shoot and it actually goes through the basics of what you then realise is how something is put together for a television news item and for instance how formulaic it is. It tells you how cutaways work, how an establishing shot works etc. and how you get out of trouble. But I had to learn it. It was funny. Somebody had to direct me to learn it because it was like proper filmmaking. Once I had learnt it, it meant watching television was very different. Often in the 80s and 90s, because of the public artwork I did, I featured for an alarming amount of time on that very local news, *Midlands Today*. There would be either 'a cat got stuck up a tree' or 'a dog had eight puppies' or 'a sculptor did a piece of art' and often, I was that slot. The camera crew would come along and they would look at the body casting or the horses or whatever it was I was doing but I knew what they would do: 'Now we'll do the Noddies.' The way that they put it together meant that I watched television in a different way, but it influenced the way that I put together the *Coronation Street* piece. It was a bit chunky and it was a bit clunky like cut-away, edit, headshot, shoulder shot etc.

JH: Can you talk about your artistic processes, which are varied, and how those have or have not changed over the years?

KA: It is highly weighted at the idea end. I need to have it sorted in my head, what am I doing. I'm often consciously or unconsciously looking to reveal things, truths, I suppose, about the processes, about the material, about the situation. I usurp or undermine or collapse a situation. So, I do a lot of thinking and planning and rehearsing, at least in my head. I would like to think that when I am in a piece that I'm not acting, but in a way, the fictional persona of being an artist at all is a big act. Both my parents died recently so I've had reason to reflect. You look back a lot when that happens, and a lot of it is to do with class and what parental expectations were. A lot of what I get away with is to do with me acting it. It's like I didn't assume. This could be a terrible chip on my shoulder but I think there is a thing about not assuming. The work doesn't assume the status of art. It contests it. It questions it and prods it. I'm learning to accept that there are works within works. If I really pull myself out and I look at me doing this interview, there's an element of acting in this that's not for real. It's not a lie either, but it's like I can't do this seriously. I can't do this unless I'm doing it with a slight tongue in cheek, or with a kind of send up aspect to it, because my Mum's going to come through that door any moment and say 'Don't take any notice of him'. Because of that, it makes a big difference not assuming the status of an artist, and not assuming that anything could be art just because it's bronze or just because it's oil paint. There's something about the works, they sneak in and then they start to happen if you get it, but if you don't get it and you don't look again, you're never going to get it. So the conceptual thing is a big part of it. I think for years I underplayed the materiality of things, but I do like light. I liked film because of the projection. I think light, not just in a Henry Moore sense of 'sculpture looks good in the open air', but in the way the light changes the Cathedral Window in the Forest of Dean. Aesthetically I respond, or psychologically, like everybody, you respond to the Sun. You just feel better. I have an aesthetic response to light. Light framing that comes out of painting. Like the fact that a painting is limited, there are things in the frame and not in the frame, on the stage and not on the stage. I'm attracted to the visual aesthetic that's to do with framing. Despite that in one's life, you might be anxious of it, but sometimes going in the free fall, love performing, love the 'here we go, we could fuck this up' or 'this could

take off', something could happen that you didn't anticipate between you and the audience. You have certain props, either the slides that you're showing and talking about, or you're certain you've learnt your script in your head, but you're not reading a script. I could never read a script. I've attempted on occasion, within a context of a conference, to read something from a sheet of paper or a letter, but I can't do it. I just have had to walk and talk through it. And that's a lot like bronze. It's like bronze casting. There's a very intense moment where it's poured and it changes state. It's magic. It's almost religious somehow. There's something happening between one state and another. They are my processes, and a big part of it is not a matter of, 'Do I know anything? I know nothing', but 'I know a man or a woman who does.' I use assistance all the time.

JH: The train of thought through your work is a conceptual train of thought, which is the same throughout. It's consistent, and there's an awareness and understanding of the audience, of the viewer, and the receiver.

KA: Yes, and there is identification with the audience because I am one of them, in that sense.

JH: And there is a time base, perhaps movement, but it is time-based. I think it's important to say that you've worked across different mediums or what are perceived as different mediums. There is the very traditional sculpture in the bronze making and video. How do you pull those things together?

KA: In the idea often they are separate. They are all facets of the same person but the art world does not necessarily know that. Sometimes I think I am suspiciously good at talking about my work within a slide-show context. It's a way of bringing it together where seamlessly, or somewhat seamlessly, I can go from talking about something that's a stained glass window, in a forest, in Gloucestershire, to talking about a virtual reality piece. What ties it all together, is me. It's like this interview. It's a lot to do with branding. The consistent factor though all of the work, is that there are certain devices I play with. There are conceptual ones and visual ones, which I think make all of my work, readily, connect. They connect with one another. It's like the irony of somebody saying they were a site-specific sculptor, but you know it's a Anthony Gormley, a mile off, wherever it is. Whether it's on a beach or on a mountain, it's a lead man or a cast man. I'm not saying that they don't have worth but that's branding. If with the Kevin Atherton work, which is site specific, there are some similarities, but it might be a stained glass window or it might be three bronze figures. There's no branding going on because they really are site-specific. They are not site-general. So in that sense, the very fact that they are different should be a signal to an informed or interested viewer. 'This is a Kevin Atherton because I don't immediately recognise it as a Kevin Atherton', that's how you should immediately recognise it. There is a truth to that, that hopefully the work keeps surprising people, and surprising me. You flip something that's maybe a trademark and you turn it the other way, like the piece *Another Sphere*. It recognises in the title 'Jesus, I'm doing another sphere' but because it's two hemispheres, and the work only comes together through video surveillance space, it takes it into another sphere, another realm. But it's self critical in the title too about how many spheres. It means that they see it as a work, which because of the size of the budgets they tend to need, this series of works has been going on for over 10 years now. But, if you look at them, one after another, they flip one another. They mirror and they are mirrors. So

cumulatively, maybe I end up making half a dozen of them. But they, pun intended, reflect on one another. They reflect literally, also because there's a reflection within them. So I'm coming back and flipping it. Maybe this work alters one's perception on previous work.

JH: How have you incorporated the changing technologies, because you have also worked with sound?

KA: I've worked with sound and mainly with voice. I love the sound of my own voice. I did works with Audio Arts in the 70s and 80s, which were auditions. I did a piece for Audio Arts in the early 80s with sound three sound cassettes. I do this quite a bit, I realise now, I was asked by Bill Furlong if I wanted to be one of the artist on *The Tape*, *The Tape* was like audiotape, but a bit bigger. There were three of these in a presentation box. He asked if I would be one of maybe 40 artists to do a piece for it and I said, 'Yes, but rather than do a piece on it, what I'll do is an audio ad for it and put that on it.' So you've already bought it, because the ad never appeared on the radio, and the ad is just appears on each of the three tapes periodically. It's me cajoling you to buy the cassette, which you've already got. It's a bit like Robert Morris's *The Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making*. It's like a cassette product full of the sound of its own selling, but it's already been bought. So, being more than willing to take on the character of the tall-in-the-door type voice: 'Buy this cassette now it's a bargain.' It was lowering the tone of things if you like. The most recent example of changing technology is in the virtual reality technology. Because I don't sit at the computer, and was again dependant upon assistance, I established a research team when I taught at Chelsea, called Virtual Realities as Fine Art Medium. When I came to Dublin, I was the first head of the Fine Art Media Department and established an MA course called MA Virtual Realities. It is not about headsets from the very fact that it is virtual realities, it's plural, it's recognising that there were a number of ways of producing virtual realities going back to Pre-Renaissance wall painting, going back to cave painting etc, to immersive and interactive. It's about recognising this thing about producing work that actually is virtual, in that it only happens when it's looked at. It's almost like Polar bears who play violins when nobody is watching reversed into making a work where the polar bears do play violins when you are watching. There is a cartoon in the *Beano* that was a cross-section of mainly somebody's head called *The Numbskulls*. VR is like that as a technology. Immersive VR is like that. I know it must work digitally or whatever, but my mental construct of what it is, is that within the reality machine, within the computer, the sensor sends the message to the computer, 'Oh shit, he's moved his head!' And the Numskulls in the machine are shifting the scenery to correspond with having moved your head to the left. It's like the Numskulls taking on food and shovelling it down the gullet. There was a point at Chelsea when I really thought that headsets were going to be the new monitors and I wanted to make work for VR headsets. Over the last 6 years, that's proved not to be the case, although I think historically it might yet still happen. It might historically be like the dividing role that happened with cinema, where in the early part of the 19th century, it could have gone into devices that were more *What The Butler Saw* type telly-body devices rather than the cinema. I think we turned away from the headset rather quickly, and in 40 years time when the technology makes the things less heavy that might be revisited. Nevertheless head-mounted displays, VR, acted as catalysts to the way that we might think about the virtual and about reality. So in terms of the way that I've incorporated new technology, it's not been just for the sake of it. There would have been periods

when I've turned away from it and there were periods when I worked just with sculpture because I wasn't initially at all interested in the kind of Bill Viola spectacle video projection. I couldn't see the point of it. I still have problems with it. I find projection convenient now through this ongoing virtual reality performance piece I do called Gallery Guide. I stand in front of a video projection which itself is a computer walkthrough of a computer model of a gallery, which has within it various fictional computer generated art works. As the guide in a persona rather like Mr. Magoo in Cyber Space, I describe them as if they were physical realities. I rather knowingly, describe them as typical art world installations of the late nineteen nineties, early 21st century. They have a truth in that it's the type of thing that certain artists might do, like require that windows are knocked out. They might require windows are knocked out somewhat the way somebody like *Richard Wilson* might, but they push it a bit further by being preposterous in proposing things that people would never propose, like that the local yacht club would sail up and down outside of the gallery in synchronisation with a Victorian toy, which also has model boats in it. It allows me to be absurd. It allows me a safety net to make works that have to be convincing, but at the end of the day, I didn't really make them. I was indebted to Sally Williams editing the text. It took me a long time to do it, but it's convincing in that catalogue speak, talking about people. Again, hidden within it, not dependent upon that reading, but bottled in by Cleveland Connell. Why have I called him Cleveland Connell? Because my father's side of the family were Connells. Why Cleveland? Cleveland is the town in America where all of the Manx went when they immigrated to America. You don't need to know this, but you might pick up John Sale, my grandmother was Sale. That was her name. The introduction was written by Frank Cumani. That is a combination of Frankie Dettori, the jockey, and Luca Cumani, his trainer. There are gags to be got, but it's not dependent upon it. It was pointed out to me by Alison Winkle when I was talking with her, that a lot of this isn't post-modern posturing, to knowingly do these things. It's not stupid. I do know what I'm doing. It's like doing it for real but there's some necessity to create a space within a space that permits me to do it. I cannot abide and I cannot understand how the YBA-ism, allows you to be an artist without any sense of self-parody. You can poke fun at everybody else but not at yourself, the first person that I am poking fun at is me. Tracey Emin has to be a joke, but not everyone is allowed to enter it, because if they did then it would collapse. It's one-dimensional. It's not Tracey Emin setting up this character that she is playing with. I am been more critical, not of Tracey Emin because I don't think that Tracey Emin really knows what she is doing, I'm being more critical of the critics who permit her or allow that to happen.

JH: It's interesting that you've brought that up, because what you're questioning is the construction of the artist.

KA: Yes, and that was a central part of the work in the 80s, which predated the whole *YBA* thing. OK, every generation of artists has to deal with the next one and go, 'What?' but when all of that went began to take off in the 90s it as though Gillian Wearing invented video art. My arse she invent video art. But the art world responded as if it was looking at the first video art work it had ever seen.

JH: That was in the commercial art world though, because there are separate aspects. They are so complex, the art worlds.

KA: Yes, but to a wider audience, that's the way historically it might appear and it's mistruth. It's also irresponsible of Gillian Wearing. I'm not saying that Gillian Wearing has to begin every interview by saying 'I'm indebted to the artists in the seventies', some chance, but the work itself doesn't even recognise its influences. Even if it recognises that it came from broadcast TV fly-on-the-wall stuff, but even broadcast TV was influenced by video art. She's been influenced. She doesn't know she's been influenced by video art, but she has. It might have come via television. I think that with the whole *YBA* thing, it's an interesting phenomenon that it came out of *Goldsmiths*. *Goldsmiths* never had a strong time base media element in the 70s. It was very object based with Michael Craig-Martin etc. Of course there were artists there like John Thompson, who selected me for the *British Art Show*, with the *Coronation Street* piece, but when video did happen there it was almost like there was a missing bit in the *Goldsmiths* puzzle. When video began to happen, it wasn't until the 90s and somehow because *Goldsmiths* was very gallery orientated, in the first place, and then in the 90s it was OK to be in the gallery rather than critique it from without, or even from within, there was a little bit of the history of *British Art* missing from *Goldsmiths*, which it doesn't excuse, but it some way helps explain the naivety of 'Video art begun in 1990'.

JH: I thought Tracey Emin went to Maidstone?

KA: Yes, I remember Tracey Emin as a student. She was a very naïve printmaking student. I think when she came she mixed with David Hall's students in time based media at Maidstone. That's how I remember her, and then she went to the Royal College and like all these fuckers who go to the Royal College, hated it. I don't understand how you can apply to a college, go to it, desperately want to get into it, go through an interview process to go there, and then say 'It's shit! You are 'it!' In effect you're saying 'I'm shit'. If you didn't want to go there, don't apply there. It's an odd. I don't get it. I went to Leeds College of Art and it was fantastic. It changed my life. The other people there were fantastic. We all subscribed to the place we were in. We made this commitment to a place. We were the place. We were good. It was good. It was bigger than any individual.

JH: Did you have any particular ideological reasons why you wanted to use video?

KA: I think that was a big thing to position oneself outside of a system that I was always suspicious of and uncomfortable with, even though I work with it now. I haven't done anything in the gallery for about 4 years, which was a little retrospective show I had in Dublin. It then went to the Manx Museum. But I've worked in this ideological space outside of the gallery, against the gallery. That's why the gallery won't beat a path to my doorstep and thank me for being critical of it. But video was a part of that, and I was taken up with all of that. Nam June Paik's optimism about this as the way of distributing work and it being away from commodity etc, it was for those reasons. For me, David Hall, is a very significant artist. In showing what a video cathode does, he was exploring innovative work that was looking at the mechanics of video. What I represent, I can't speak for my generation, is a second layer of that, where we were less interested in the nuts and bolts of how the thing was put together. This isn't having a go at David Hall but I would like to think, and I could be deluding myself, that there's more room for content. In that second generation we were backing off the technology a bit. The technology enables something to happen. Mind you, David Hall would say that about what he was doing. But I think you could look at that, and all

those earlier things that were about monitors within monitors and although mine are monitors within monitors, there's a conversation on the monitor. It's not just the monitor and the camera. It's not just absolutely locked into a loop. It's still recognising the loop, the self-reflective way of looking at itself, but there's something put in there. In my case a human voice, me. The subject becomes me, as much as the subject is video. Sorry, I'm being lacking in generosity perhaps, if I said that there was a generation six years before me that was more innovative, and more technically orientated in its exploration of the parameters of video. I didn't belong to that generation. I don't think it's a matter of being born to late, either by choice even, now in relationship to virtual reality technology, I'm not there cut and thrust, 'This is what it can do technically'. I'm sitting back from it a bit, and by the time it gets to me, I'm more prepared for self-parody. I think there's more playfulness in it, but then having said that, that's flawed because David Hall's pieces for TV were very playful too. Sorry David, I'm not nailing this. I think there was almost an obligation with that first generation to really go there technically. I'm less technical, is basically what I'm saying. This isn't a moan but I wasn't, and I knew at the time I wouldn't be, in the *Serpentine Video Show*. I wasn't in a lot of British Council video shows in Canada or in Paris that, for instance, Stephen Partridge was in. Yes I used video, but I didn't use it in such a purist way. It was like there was an element even then of using it, but being outside of it. Prodding it a bit. 'What is this video art thing?' I didn't subscribe and yet its like now, in an art school, the easy option is video. This is 'middle-aged man' stuff, but it's forgotten that if you made video or if you made film, like when I made film as a student, I had to leave the fine art department to make it. I had to go to graphics because that's where the gear was. In the old days maybe if you had a difficult student or a student who wasn't really engaging with work, you might say, 'Well maybe you want to spend a couple of weeks in print making.' Now the equivalent soft-option is video because it's like it's lost its edge. You had to fight for it then. If you made video, it was like leaping up your artists licence: 'I'm not making art I'm making video.' I, of course, like everybody else making video, was first of all making art. I was resistant to making video art in that sense. In the 70s, I was far more known and placed within the performance art context. This is better, because it does David Hall more credit. I was a bit of a visitor. I was in the Herbert Art Gallery Video Show that Stephen Partridge organised in the 70s and I did a performance. I was more performance, and known more as a performance person, and I was lucky if I came away with a video record of what I was doing. Actually, that's a lie. I never documented them, but I'd use video as a part of the performance, as in, *In Two Minds*. I can't remember the title of the piece I did in the Herbert Art Gallery Show but it will be in the catalogue. But for instance, Steve (Partridge) was a video artist from the start. I never had that status and didn't particularly want it. If I was in a similar category to Steve Partridge, who is a little bit younger than me, I was in performance art. I was in performance art conferences in England, or festivals in England and in Europe. Video grew afterwards. I bit of an impostor. I was a bit of a visitor to it.

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

KA: There were good schemes like *Video Artists' on Tour*. I was on that. That was a system where the venue, in my case often the college, would pay half of the money; and the Arts Council would pay the travelling expenses and the other half of the money. You got the equivalent of a days teaching. It was something like £60 and your train fare. I remember having to convince David Curtis that I should go on it. I

remember convincing certain personnel at 105 Piccadilly that I should be on it because I was on it anyway. I took *The Video Artists' on Tour* thing and I was doing one a week. It was very helpful, and then the bloody Arts Council told me I was using it too much, and that there was a finite amount of money, which was there for every British video artist to use. But because I promoted myself via the *Video Artists' on Tour* thinking that this was a good scheme that allowed artists to use their initiative, I was stunned at what I was told. I thought the reading of it was 'Use this scheme.' When I used it, I felt like I was being rapped over the knuckles. The Arts Council funding funded me. I was in the British Art Show, where I got a budget to make the Coronation Street piece. Then I got funding for performance as well. I'd get say £600. I was committed to do 4 performances at venues like Battersea Arts Centre, Butlers Wharf, Ayton Basement in Newcastle, those kinds of places. The reason I did quite a bit of stuff in Holland, looking back, with De Appel and Rotterdam and places like that, was because of trouble with the Arts Council of Great Britain, as it was then. I remember getting a phone call saying that I'd put in a proposal and I wanted to do a multi-monitor play, where it was more like a 'play', more dramatic than anything I'd done before. All of the characters would have a monitor, so it wouldn't be live but the playing with the monitors would be live. I'd put in a bid for that and the budget I'd put in was £3000. I got a phone call from the Arts Council saying that it was great idea. They'd given the go-ahead for it. 'Oh good' I thought. 'But, we'll give you one and a half thousand.' That was like 'Thank you, goodbye.' I remember putting the phone down, talking with Vicky, my wife, and then just getting really angry. I wanted to say, 'You can fucking stick it!' because it dawned on me that yes, I would be doing it, but I would be doing it for nothing. I'd be paying for it. My wife used to say to me often 'Stop sponsoring British Art.' The biggest sponsor of British Art was the British artist. It was always like that. 'Here's the money, only it's half of the money. Here's a scheme use your initiative. Don't use your initiative, you are using it too well, you are taking all the money.' There wasn't a venue committed to it but in my head I saw it in the theatre space at the ICA. It was like a natural development, I felt at the time, from *Coronation Street* in that I'd write a drama and that I would enter that world. God knows what it would have been like, but there would have been a theatre and it would have been live, but with no live characters it. They would have all been monitors, talking to one another. I imagine it might have been a bit like *Abigail's Party*, I remember watching that and thinking it was an absolutely fantastic theatre of embarrassment. It pre-empted *The Office*. You can hardly watch it. So it would have been a bit like that, but it never happened. Also, with funding, this is really bitchy, but I thought 'Sod the Arts Council! Sod galleries! I'm using video as a critique of television, beyond television.' Not at all costs, I was invited on to the *Big Breakfast* show once to read out a recipe. Tracey Emin would have done it. I didn't do it. What the hell? I don't want to just be on television, just to get my face on television. *In The Bed with Paula*. It was that early. It was right at the beginning. It was to go on and read out a recipe. It was all right if you didn't have one, they'd give you one.

JH: So did you didn't do it?

KA: No, I'm desperate, but not that desperate. I got wind that somebody at Channel 4, a commissioning editor, really could not abide my work, so that stopped me. I thought, 'I've got a choice here. Either I carry on making video work for television and it doesn't happen in this country and I am a martyr to it or I do what is happening to me.' I remember going up to Richard Hamilton's up in Hampstead on the Tube with this

Umatic video tape, wrapped in about six layers of silver foil to protect it from the dynamos on the bloody doors or something. The question about funding, the simple answer is that I did shit jobs for years and years, cleaning up Wimpy's and all of that. I worked as an attendant. There was an interim, where I worked for about five years and I got a phone call from Nick Serota and I thought, 'This is the phone call.' I'd done video performances at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford when Nick Serota was the director there, and then he moved to the Whitechapel. I came back to a squat. I was living in Stockwell and somebody said, 'Nick Serota rang you. He wants you to ring urgently the Whitechapel.' It was a job as a kind of technician invigilator. So for about five years, shortly after I got married in 1977, that's what I did. I worked in the gallery and watched people watching art and talked to them. It was before uniformed guards. You were allowed to smoke, make telephone calls, eat sandwiches and engage with the public. I did an awful lot of it and a lot of throwing out winos and tramps or allowing winos and tramps into the Whitechapel. Nick Serota did some very good shows. It was useful. It was a useful stepping-stone. It was odd. I was behind the desk at the Whitechapel and I remember getting the week off to go Paris to be in a British Council show called *Un Certain Art Anglais*. I went there and a week later I was back behind the desk at the Whitechapel. It was flexible in that sense. That was the exhibition where I did a performance on a set of steps in the old *Musee d'Art Moderne*. I stripped down to my underclothes until eventually I was naked and examining the clothes of the audience. The piece was called *An Audience's New Clothes* and right at the point where my head was between my legs and I was doing what every other British artist on that show was doing, looking up my own arse, the Director of the *British Council* and his wife walked down the stairs next to me. There were telegrams and that was the end. It was the last *British Council Show* I ever did.

JH: What do you mean there were telegrams?

KA: From the *British Council Office* in Paris back to Britain, asking 'What is this man doing?'

JH: Hadn't they seen the *Viennese Actionists*? Didn't they know anything about the International art world?

KA: No. This was an opening and there was a naked man literally looking up his own arse. The timing was the best. The whole performance wasn't with my head between my legs. It was just at that moment that they came down the stairs. I have it on good authority: 'Black List'

JH: You worked at the Slade.

KA: At the Slade, Oh Christ I taught. Oh Jesus, did I teach. I taught part-time, full-time and there were weeks where I had regular part-time teaching at the Slade, the Royal College of Art in the Environmental Media department, and at Maidstone in the *Time Based Media* department, Middlesex, then Chelsea, Cardiff at one time. I had weeks where honestly, in five days from a Monday to a Friday, I taught in five Art Schools. It was the same gags with different audiences. I could get away with it, but it was pretty exhausting. Then I dropped Maidstone. But, I was 41 or something, before I got I full-time job, before I got a permanent job. Then when I was 41, I got a 0.5 job at Chelsea, in fact, because Stuart Marshall had died. He'd done the job before and I did that job. Media at Chelsea then, was a part of Painting and I took it out of that and made it as a

separate department. When we merged with Printmaking, I became a principle lecturer, full time and now I'm a Head of Department here at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. Apart from Falmouth, which I think is the one BA Art College that I've never been in, in England, I've been in the rest of them in one form or another. With education, I've not come from the basis of 'I want to get out of here. I wish I was in my studio.' But, wanting to be in education. I think a lot of really good work and some really good people came out of and continue to come out of art education, both in Britain and here in Ireland. It's good place to be. I don't resent it. I don't think being a teacher is a bad thing and I think if you are constantly moaning about education as a way of making a living, you're better off out of it.

The whole body of work that I've done hasn't, with the exception of one or two close friends and my wife, who died recently, had the full picture. Not many people have the full picture of the range of work, from the public sculptures, to the performance, to the sound works, to this, that and the other. Even myself sometimes: when you are immersed in one type of work, you forget that you have this other body of work. I think the sum is greater than the whole. That's why 'art' is a verb rather than a noun. I think my significance lies in the territory covered. There's plenty more mileage left. There are things to do. You have to watch that you don't lament that what you didn't get. There are lots of things that I did get, that were opportunities and continue to do so. When I was doing *Video Artists on Tour* with venues in Scout huts in the wildest parts of Derbyshire, I never gave a substandard presentation. It's funny, years later it leads to a commission. You can backtrack it. It was like 'Somebody who was a student saw you in a Scout hut in Derby and they thought you were funny.' You kind of go, 'Good! I was never off I was always on!' I'm off when I sleep. I'm off at home. It sounds like an old-stager thing to say, but I think it's true. They are all important.

JH: Were there specific facilitators or curators who were important to the exhibition?

KA: There was an individual, Rita Donagh, who was extremely helpful to my career. Rita taught at the Slade so did I. She has an identity of her own, but happens to be the partner of Richard Hamilton. Hamilton selected me for one or two shows I'm sure through Rita's prompting. I was in the *One Artist One Day* show at The Angela Flowers Gallery and other things came my way because of that connection. Lesley Greene at Public Art Department Trust. Vivian Lovell at the Ikon and then later PACA – Public Art Commissions' Agency. In Holland, Weis Smals who along with Josine van Droffelaar were very supportive of me, and very regrettably, they died in a plane crash. Anna Ridley at *Analogue* was somebody else who was supportive and did the video documentation of *Video Document*. That is also a piece or was the idea for the *Iron Horses* piece. A lot of support came from one's peer group. There was a real sense of support in one another, and going to one another's performances, and videos and stuff, in and around Covent Garden, Earlham Street, ACME Gallery, AIR Gallery on Shaftsbury Avenue and then later Rosemary Gallery. It seemed to last all through the 70s and into the 80s. I came to London when I was 24, three years after coming out of art school. I had lived in the North of England until then and resisted coming to London before. Then on Day One, when I came to London I thought, 'This is where I want to be' and Covent Garden was right in the change, between having been a flower market, to becoming trendy and arty. But it was in that transition, where it hadn't become branded. It hadn't become what it is now. There were loads of little galleries, and not so little galleries, Robert Self at PMJ Self, Tony Stokes at Garage Gallery, ACME

around the corner. Everybody used to drink in that pub on the corner. I was first of all living in a squat in Notting Hill and then living in a squat in Stockwell but I knew, that if I just got on the Tube and go up to Covent Garden, come out of that Dickensian lift and just go in that pub, there would be people there talking about art. It was great. Then Butlers Wharf came up. That was myself, Alison Winckle, Dave Critchley, Martin Hearne and Mick Duckworth, three of whom came from the Isle of Man, most of whom came from provincial art schools because despite the fact that London Art Schools thought they were cutting edge, Leeds College of Art, believe me, was miles ahead of them.

JH: What critical feedback or public attention did the work attract?

KA: I got some good reviews: Marc Chaimowicz, it was a review of a performance for *Studio International*. I was reviewed in that for the *Double Vision* piece, which was a video performance. I was in small magazines, not a vast amount though. I was in *Roselee Goldberg's* first edition of *Performance Art*, but not now. I've been removed. But, I was in the first edition. There were more in Germany, and in *Art Monthly*, Michael Archer used write about me. Then for the public art and public sculptures. I reckon with my career, there's thirty-year catch up. The video thing is starting to happen here and now and maybe somebody will do something in 10 years time about public art, but I was in Thames and Hudson's. What I think is peculiar, by and large, either it was ignored or it went into the library. It went into the Thames and Hudson publication about art and architecture or public art, or more latterly in Cate Elwes's book *Video Art, A Guided Tour: belligerent Manx* artist my arse. There wasn't much, real, mediation. There wasn't much in the critical press before it became history. It's funny. I think that's the case. It was like, 'Did I do that? Is there anybody there?' and then nothing because there wasn't that currency of feedback, or of critical response. Then it was in the 'Art Book'. In the Hampstead and Highgate Express, there was one heading, for a public sculpture I did in a peace park, which happens to be a body-cast of me looking in a pond and within the pond there's bronze cut out of reflection, a bit Hockney-esque where I am looking at it. The heading in the Ham & High was 'Is it Art or is it Atherton?' It kind of tended to go from that to being in the Deanna Petherbridge's book, *Art Within Reach*. I am a fridge magnet. I haven't got the key ring on me but the *Forest of Dean Window* is a fridge magnet. It's also a make-it-yourself tapestry. A key ring, a fridge magnet, I hasten to add my name is not mentioned on any of these products. I receive nothing. It's gone into that and that's 19 years on. It's been sweatshirts and t-shirts and everything.

JH: So you think there's a textual version of that?

KA: Yes, and an embroidery version, to play the pun. Yes, there's a textile one and there's a textual one. It's funny. How did it get in there? How is it in the history books or how is it a fridge magnet? When it wasn't in the media? It by passed it. It shot through that or it was ignored.

JH: But doesn't the critical analysis come from the artist? Shouldn't it come from the artist?

KA: I think the critical analysis is embodied within the work. It's obvious that the work is critically aware, but if the question is, 'Was the work within Britain in the 70s and 80s, mediated by critics?' The answer is, sometimes, but to a large extent, no.

JH: I wouldn't necessarily say it like that. My perception of critical analysis by artists happened with the filmmakers, very specifically, and happened by people like David Hall and Stuart Marshall. That's the critical analysis I'm thinking of. That is by artists, not by an external source.

KA: Sorry. I misunderstood the question. Yes, I was a part of that in British Art Schools through knowing Stuart Marshall. Before I worked full-time at Chelsea, I worked there part-time and I knew Stuart. Likewise at the Royal College of Art, I would be in debates with Peter Kardia and David Hall. I would be in debates and fights with David Hall and with Stephen Partridge. So there was a whole milieu there. The critical discussion about what constituted video art, I was in it every day because I was in an art school pretty well every day. It was ongoing and it was lively and sparky. It contested things. People were close to fights because it was their lives. It meant something.

JH: Was there any particular contextual, critical writing that you would agree or disagree with?

KA: With the things that David Hall wrote, one had to take a position in relationship to them, sometimes against them, sometimes for them, but you were very aware, of him as a feature in the landscape. With performance, it was more to do with identifying with other artists. I remember as a student Bruce Lacey doing a talk on his own work that was burlesque. It was fantastic. I didn't necessarily like all of the work, but I really liked his attitude towards his work. That's not theoretical but I remember that happening and I thought, 'God it must be good to do that!' I was in first year or something. Looking back on Leeds, Leeds took a real stand that was very anti-London, which was anti the gallery and anti the establishment. Now that I've just finished being an external examiner there, it sounds ludicrous that Leeds, which is only 200 miles up the road from London, should be so. There were some very good people who taught at Leeds, primarily Robin Page who was a Canadian, who came to Leeds. He was a member of Fluxus and did five years at Leeds. He left fairly early on in my time there and went to Germany. He was inspirational as idea based person. George Brecht, the artist, had also been at Leeds. So, on one hand at Leeds, there was this Harry Thubron type truth to the materials and basic design element, and then there was, and I'm not joking, a thing called, Yorkshire Surrealism. I remember going there, from the Isle of Man. It was dark satanic mills, and it was bloody good. It was funny and you weren't encouraged to take yourself seriously. Anthony Earnshaw was a craftsman-engraver and there was just this funny thing about Yorkshire and Surrealism. Somehow, it was a good match. Actually, they are not incongruous. I went from the Isle of Man, where I'd wanted to do Isle of Man, Celtic, William Scott style painting pots and pans on surfaces, to Leeds and encountered ideas that changed the way that I thought about art. I didn't feel isolated at all. Even now, I go to shows, like you do, but I read about stuff a lot as well. You get it in mediated form. It's important to see the real work, but it's also important to be aware that it's happening. I suppose I would identify myself with, and was identified with, certain art schools. For instance, I taught at Chelsea for a long time, I taught at Hornsey or Middlesex. I taught for a bit at Maidstone. Of the art schools, apart from this one, The National College of Art and Design in Dublin, I would say Chelsea was a big part of my life. I worked there with Jeff Edwards who was a painter, and who would be as influential on me as an

artist, in what an artist is, than anybody making performance or video or sculpture. It's funny Jeff Edwards went to Leeds College of Art five years before I did, but had that same seed planted by similar people, or the same people, in some cases that were at Leeds when I was there. One day somebody will write the history of Leeds College of Art and it really was streets and streets ahead in the 60s. I went there in 1969 and it was still good.

JH: What are your most current works or works in progress?

KA: There's the *Sphere* piece, which brings together two strands of work: the sculptural strand, the public sculpture work and the video work. It's a public sculpture made for a park in *Ballymun* in *Dublin*. It consists of two, three-meter diameter mirror polished-stainless steel hemispheres, positioned at either end of a park. They are positioned in relationship to two CCTV cameras on 10-meter high poles. The image will come together on a video screen in a pavilion. Also, in the park, the two separate hemispheres become a full sphere, using the green of the grass as green screen, and putting together something on the screen that in physical reality doesn't exist. It also encompasses the reflection of people out of the frame, and people within the frame, disappearing in the middle out of frame. The other work that is ongoing is a piece called *Gallery Guide* where I as a performer stand in front of a video projection of a computer walk-through model of an exhibition that has five fictional art works within it. The role that I take, standing in front of the projection and walking about, is that of a gallery guide who, in a very bland straight-faced way describes the works as if they were physical entities. Of course, they are digital entities. They are computer-generated entities. There are two truths and the audience gets caught between one and another because they are equally, I hope, believable. They have a reality as fiction, because they are not spoofs of particular art works but they are convincingly realities. The fiction within the work has credibility so people, hopefully, get caught between two things. They laugh because there's no other way of responding unless, as in the case with the erstwhile, rather earnest, sculpture students at Chelsea, who were making notes of the sculptures for themselves, and completely missing the point. They missing the irony, in their eagerness to be the next big thing of British Art, bless their cotton socks. I'm doing that work in a way that I would like that work to develop. Architecturally I split them into works and I present them within a gallery, where as you go into a space and there's a projection of a piece for that space, so the work rather than being in one space, occurs as you walk through a sequence of spaces. I would have an installation version in a museum with a number of separate rooms, but on occasion I would perform it, and crocodile-like, lead an audience through the spaces and do the commentary about the works live. So, a lot is happening. In lots of ways, they are different than the way that I would have envisaged 30 years ago, but in lots of other ways exactly the same.



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