Two chrome desktop fans are sitting on a table, facing inwards toward each other. There is the distinctive hum of the blades blowing air. In the middle of this symmetrical image, separating the two fans lies a single piece of paper, flat on the table. A figure, cropped by the camera, waits behind the table; he stoops and in one single move stands the paper upright, and walks off screen. The paper wobbles but remains upright, held in place by the airflow from both fans. It sways in the turbulence but continues to remain upright in the centre of the screen, dancing, holding the viewer’s attention. There is a click, the hum of the blades stop, and the paper keels over, and drops lifelessly onto the table, back to its original inert position. The screen fades to white.

The poetry in this small inquisitive experiment, set against the stark utilitarian environment, is a piece by John Wood and Paul Harrison. They stage strange micro-events that always somehow make sense, no matter how absurd they are, due to the careful timing and choreography.

I arrive at John Wood and Paul Harrison’s studio. It is located in Bristol’s Spike Island, and is next door to one of Aardman Animations’ studios, famous for Wallace and Gromit and Morph, a Plasticine figure who along with his alter ego, Chas, would explore and challenge the environment of the animator’s desk. Here inside Wood and Harrison’s studio is a stage set of an empty office, with its false ceiling, dark grey carpet tiles, a solitary clock and filing cabinet. The open front has a vertical track, a modified ladder; they are attempting to film a sequence of one hundred events as if the camera tracks down the outside of an office block, looking in through the windows.
PAUL HARRISON: It's taken us months and months.

JOHN WOOD: Months and months.

M. NORMAN DAWSON: What isn't working?

JW: Well, we've used the truck horizontally before, but when we changed it to vertical it has put loads of different stresses onto it. Initially we couldn't get the speed we had to change motors. Then it was vibrating a tiny bit, which was being magnified by the camera so we were getting this terrible judder; so we had to modify the mechanism. Lew at Aardman's is really brilliant – he's a product engineer and he comes in his lunchtimes to help.

JW: How often do you both get together to work?

PH: We do still do that, absolutely! When we're working on a video the first thing we do is come into the room and lay out all our drawings.

JW: And laugh at them! The ability to be able to work at a distance is the result of twenty years' work. We've got that level of understanding.

PH: In the past we would go into the studio for ten days in a row. We would work out huge amounts in those periods.

JW: And it's still the case?

PH: In those blocks I presume you had things you wanted to do and then things that you did for the hell of it.

JW: We'd come in and get the kettle on and have sandwiches.

PH: Read the paper.

JW: Do the crossword.

PH: We would do long days.

JW: There weren't any emails coming in. There was no one calling us up. We didn't leave art school thinking we were going to sell work, especially with video, and that was quite liberating because our motivation was just to go in and do stuff that we wanted to do.

PH: You started collaborating at college?

PH: We were both at college in Bath.

JW: I was one year below.

PH: I had been out a year when I got a residency in a school in Leicestershire. I'd been there about six months when a mutual friend suggested that John should get in touch. So John invited himself along.

JW: And you started working together from there?

PH: Yes, we made some work and I sent a VHS tape off to a couple of film festivals just on the off chance and they were selected.

JW: What happened from there?

PH: Well the Chisenhale show in 2002 really shifted everything; it was probably the first big show that we were really happy with.

JW: It was the first one that worked as an installation, as opposed to films that we had made.

PH: What did you go about doing?

JW: The only thing we set ourselves was to make twenty-six films; we didn't know what they were going to be – we just went into the studio and started making them and they kind of fitted together. It was the first time that it worked as an exhibition as opposed to watching a single screen film, how we started to use the space and how the work related to the space. It changed how the work was viewed.
It was an installation of twenty-six TVs that we got from other projects, and VHS tapes. That was in 2000. I remember I was quoted something like £20,000 for a single DVD to be authored so in the space of a decade it's gone from that to where you churn out twenty DVDs a day for nothing. So the technology has moved on, not just in terms of how you communicate, but also within the work.

The perception of video has changed: up to that point if we had an exhibition often they would ask if it could be played in the foyer - on the foyer screens. So it was important to see it as being a sculptural installation of the work. For a long, long time, we consciously avoided using projection because there was that thing of just having a dark room with a single projection separated from other artists' work in the gallery. We didn't want to end up in a black viewing room as opposed to seeing it in the context of the gallery.

But we work with projections now.

As projectors have become more common and less special that's when we started to include them. We liked the 'unsentimental-ness' of monitors, their 'scrupulousness' and the 'domesticness' of it.

There isn't a specific way of showing the work and we'll mix it up in very different ways - single-screen versions, multi-screen versions. Just in a way to keep it fresh for us. We haven't got a lot of specifications for each piece of work that spaces have to have.

That's in keeping with the context.

There's always been an economy in the work. I like the idea that instead of shooting on film we can shoot it on video, which is inexpensive, then we can spend more time trying things out and experimenting.

What did you originally use?

We just shot straight on VHS.

We will use whatever is affordable to use, it is important to have a camera in the studio all the time.

The bigger pieces can take over a year to make so we need something that's here. We can't afford to hire in a camera. It needs to be one that we can have around all the time.

I presume that's how you are able to develop your practice?

It was invaluable in the early days when we were able to just turn the camera on and mess around in front of it, seeing what happened. And I think from that point we began learning about timing, and that's really what it's about for us. The material we use isn't videotape; it's the thing that's in front of the camera and the duration of that. And when we were filming something, we would be doing it again and again to get the take we wanted, adjusting things within it. Getting to know how long the action should last for.

It often involved lots of takes?

We joke that we shoot something and on the twenty-first take we get it right. And then we will do it again so we've got another one just in case there's a problem with the take, and we end up shooting it another twenty times before we get another one. Less now; you get to be more confident. You get that experience of knowing which one is the right take.

Sometimes we'll do something that requires sixty takes. It will be two o'clock in the morning and I genuinely start to think 'we're never going to get it'.

I start to persuade Paul that I like it how it is but you still have these nagging doubts. We then start laughing hysterically and that's followed by a wave of despair. We always get it in the end. You do get there.

I remember making the piece when I knew a belt sander onto a stack of A4 paper and the sheets shoot off in a wave. And I would get so far down into the pile and then a big clamp would just go at the same time and I would be thinking 'oh I just try and ignore it but it would rats the take'. And then it was the case of unpicking more paper, stacking it back up, picking up all the thousands of sheets of paper and doing it again and getting all the way down to the bottom and the same thing happening again. It's about trying to make it look easy or simple - but actually behind that there...
It was a drawing that had been around for a while – one of those drawings that you think that'll never work. We just set it up with a small pile of paper and it just worked.

After we'd bought various tools, we bought an electric sander – it's one of those things, like a lot of the stuff, we've got in our studio – and you're using it for something, then you think, 'Oh, I could use it for something else.' And certainly in Nine-Toed – that was one of our key decision-making factors. Whatever object we choose, we couldn't use it in the way it was supposed to be used.

Do you have any ideas after they've been filmed?

Mostly before. Partly because there are too of us, you've got that other person saying, 'No – hang on.' It doesn't stop us reintroducing those ideas years later.

We operate the three-wall system.

It's very complex.

We would have the 'clap' wall, the 'maybe' wall and the 'definitive' wall and we would swap drawings around. We would sit down and discuss 'Can we move that one over to there?' and every so often one of us would try to sneak drawings back onto the wall without the other one seeing it.

There isn't any pretence between us – we can say: 'This one's shit, this one's okay and this one's a definite.'

The bottom line is that if one of us doesn't want to do it, then we won't do it. But then that makes us very un-precious about ideas. That's just okay to come up with another one.

So there aren't any that don't work?

Not often. Because we've been through such a heavy editing system at the drawing stage, but occasionally it just doesn't work physically. When we bought loads of Hornby train sets for this idea, we were going to have these circular tracks and the trains all started together in sync and then because of the different sizes of the circles they would all go out of sync and then they would all come back into sync. But that didn't take into account that the engines warm up and the trains just go at different speeds.

Once we built this space from huge pieces of Perspex to create a snowstorm with leaf blowers and polystyrene balls. We had spent a lot of time building it, aligning it and getting it all ready. And after about a minute we realized that it wasn't going to work. We just lost it and started laughing at the stupidity of spending so much time on it. So the drawing stage is about the economy of not making stuff that isn't going to work.

Making sure that the idea is robust enough, because what you initially think is a robust idea actually with a bit of repeated looking at and discussing, for whatever reason, you realize that you were seduced by something in the idea and that it isn't strong enough to warrant it being physically made.

I can appreciate why you need to have somebody like Lew from Arribia's help you with the camera track but it's interesting that you still do the dull and laborious work like picking up all those rows of paper from the belt sander piece.

If you are doing something that requires seven or eight hours of continuous filming, lining up something accurately, we know what we want and it's about that level of focus. And contact with the work.

If we are setting up a shoot, we both just know what to do and to get on with it. We don't have to explain anything so we don't have to waste time explaining what's going. Bluntly, it's easier us doing it.

The studio isn't a precious or magical space. There's no magic! It's just a locked off space, we are quite willing to show the process behind what goes on, partly to prove that we don't use computers.

We're happy to explain our process but actually within the gallery, our aim is to walk a line between the different aspects of the work. Whether it took us sixty takes to do something is unimportant because it isn't about how difficult it was. We want it to look effortless not in a false way, not to trick anyone. We simply want people to be looking at the beauty of how a plastic cup falls off a table. That is the essence we are after.

The scenes are always panned back too.

Because what we make originates from a drawing, the use of the sparse white background references the drawing from which the work was developed. There is the fun of explaining something in two dimensions and then working from that in a real three-dimensional space, the factors you have to take into account – gravity, friction – all those kind of things are part of the challenge. And we usually try to get it as close to the drawing as possible.

And the architectural features?

In some instances it will be the set of an office. And sometimes just in terms of shot composition, we will just put a light switch in. But it's never very much a skirted board, or light switch, or plug socket, or a door.

They are particular items.

It helps to deliver an 'everyday-ness' within a work.

From a long period of filming with a static camera, you began working with tracking shots.

It was quite a big deal to decide to move the camera. We did it first in The Only Other Place, then Night and Day, and then Shelf. With Shelf we made what looked like a domestic shoot but tracked past the same section multiple times and edited it together to look like it was 16mm long. So the camera travels past objects; it was a progression from Notebook, where we compiled 101 different scenes together. But we wanted to be a kind of single take of objects that you might have on your shelf at home, of toys and bottles of wine, books.
The longer ones, like Night and Day, are all made up of short sections. It became the idea of two brothers making a film when they were at work at night, as if we were in a factory or a studio, but they only had a short amount of time each night when they had a bit of time...

They're often made up of short sections, and it is something we've always talked about - could we film something longer than three minutes in a single take? It's something that still fascinates us. It's something that keeps us looking at how can you stretch time and the duration of the piece and how long can you engage people for.

We've made longer works, for instance a 63-minute piece where an electric toothbrush is spinning around on a surface, and that has a totally different dynamic. Those works are made more to fit into an exhibition, to complement the multi-sectional works. We've used it in Switzerland and we used it on a wall where you would see it, when you entered the show, and again when you left and it would still be doing the same thing.

But the beauty of making pieces that are multi-sectional is that you can see how those sections relate to each other.

And we show them in ways that exploit this. Virtually all of the multi-screen stuff is un-synced so that you've got perhaps four monitors playing twenty-five pieces on each - so the different permutations of what is simultaneously playing are beyond our control.

It's anti-beginning, middle and end.

I think we are always actively looking to engage an audience: we don't expect people to enter a dark, awkward space halfway through a lengthy film and for them to get it. We quite like the idea of making shows that people can come in and engage with in all sorts of ways. Get some kind of experience, pleasure or something from it.

You cite Laurel and Hardy as an influence?

I think that there's so much stuff that we bring into that, that there's not a direct line from anything. We're quite happy to mix You've Been Framed with...

I would cite Morecambe and Wise as being fairly important.

Simon and Garfunkel, Spike Milligan, Woody Allen...

Equally Ken Loach, looking at the duration, one could talk about the mechanics, not of gaps, but of time and looking at the relationship between Morecambe and Wise and how long Ken Loach leaves a tape running at the end of a bit of dialogue. So I guess in terms of comedy it's looking at timing.

People tend to go for the high-end reference like Buster Keaton, whereas we'll say Laurel and Hardy - because they used to be on TV when we got back from school.

It always looks a lot of fun when you make something.

I think we deliberately try to keep a sense of enjoyment of making something out of next to nothing for not much money.

It comes back to that thing - what do you do with your time? Us making the work is about that: what do you choose to do with your time?

We're increasingly finding out that about 80 per cent of the time is spent doing all the other stuff around making the work. We have about 20 per cent of our time in the studio when you can actually do what you always wanted to do. And that studio bit is the reward that sees you through to carry on doing all the other stuff which isn't always as rewarding, but it's what you have to do to be able to be in the studio and make the work.