

The Men Inside My Television

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TVs today are not pieces of furniture like they used to be. They are flat rectangles and have no depth.

The world outside my kitchen window is grey and uninteresting. The view is limited. Beyond the glass, a low bramble hedge is vibrating vigorously in a stubborn and prolonged battle with a persistent crosswind. Snug behind the hedge is a drab wood slat fence with concrete pillars, its strong horizontal line cutting off vision at a height of six feet. Peeping over this barrier, but in reality about half a mile away, are the dark grey triangular tops of a row of pitched roofs, descending in size because of the angle of the street where they stand.

A few spiky trees poke up here and there and just fidget slightly instead of sway, their leaves having fallen off months ago. Likewise the spindly prongs of TV antennae bend only slightly in resistance to the blast apparently coming from an off-stage industrial wind machine.

This low-lying arrangement of flat shapes, tucked one behind the other gives the scene a theatrical quality. The world feels hunched down as a long procession of small blotchy clouds speed

across from right to left, through the middle of an otherwise empty sky.

There is a moment in *The Only Other Point* (2005) by John Wood and Paul Harrison when the camera, on its slow endless track, left to right, through grey simplified sets suggestive of interior or exterior landscapes, reveals what looks like a courtyard or city garden. A smallish tree with plain green leaves growing in a square black pot comes into view. This is followed by a dozen bright green balls in a loose grouping, mysteriously hanging in space at roughly the same height as the tree. As the camera moves across and the relative positioning of everything changes with perspective, a moment arrives when the group of balls becomes perfectly aligned with the tree and, as though it were their sole reason for being (which it is), the balls temporarily become the fruit of the tree. The camera moves on, the alignments untangle, we pass through a dividing wall and all is forgotten as the next new ambiguous space is revealed.

As I look from my window, I feel a similar sense of sadness at the passage of time, of things coming together and then falling apart.

The clouds are, in fact, little compound splatters of pink and grey. Like a procession of elephants joined trunk to tail, they trot across and seem to be gathering speed. If I had a gun I could pop them off one by one. I could stop things from running their course. This horizontal layering of surfaces is reminiscent of a firing range. One expects red target spots or decoy ducks to pop up without warning.

In *Three-Legged* (1997) Wood and Harrison are tied together at the knee, ‘backs against the wall’ in a recessed target area, ducking and diving. With rabbit-in-the-headlights expressions they stare at us, at our vacuum cleaner sized gun barrel (poking up from under the screen) and struggle to dodge its randomly fired tennis balls. In *Three-Legged* the artists are dressed in grey crew-necked sweatshirts, dark blue jeans and black boots. They remind me of Numbskulls, characters remembered from a comic I read as a child, who were little men with specialised jobs and who lived inside ‘rooms’ in the human head. There were Numbskulls behind each eye socket, seated on stools and looking through telescopes. A couple more lived inside the ‘mouth room’, waiting with shovels for the next input of food...

Having made a cup of tea, I wander through to my studio to resume viewing a DVD that I left playing. On the slightly bulbous 14 inch screen of the old TV I’m using as a monitor, Wood and Harrison are dressed as astronauts. It feels as though time has gone into reverse and I have returned to a room in 1968, the darkened living room where mum, dad, my brother and I all sat in the glow of our black and white set, trying to make sense of the near abstract images of human beings doing things on the surface of the moon.

I stand, mug in hand, looking at the glass window of my electrical appliance with its clear view of two small figures in space suits slowly shuffling about inside. The thought goes through my head: if I picked up the television and shook it, would the moon-dust swirl up like the snow in a snowstorm paperweight? The two lunar explorers have both stopped moving and struck similar static poses, both leaning slightly.

Now they look like those ornamental deep-sea divers used to add interest to goldfish bowls. This piece, Bored Astronauts on the Moon (2011), is one of Wood and Harrison's most recent works, and in a gallery, it will probably be screened as a large projection. I'm aware that it is unlikely to have any of the associations I'm making at this moment.

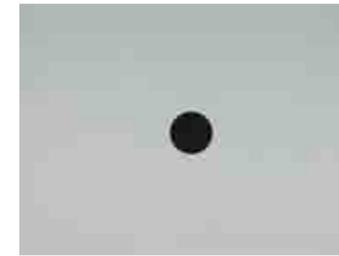
I have been looking at a selection of videos by Wood and Harrison and have been trying to establish what it is about their work that engages me. One thing I realise about viewing the work on a television, in a domestic environment instead of as installations in a gallery, is that it is not cinematic. It is not a recording of the world 'out there' and nor is it a studio recreation of it.

At this moment Wood and Harrison are two figures who are 'occupying' my TV. They have created a metaphysical space inside the box in my room. They have converted the video casing itself into a generator of metaphors and they have got me thinking about the real and imagined depth of TV screens.

The first time I saw works by John Wood and Paul Harrison was an exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery in 2002 and, as I remember, it was more like walking into an 'aquarium' than an art gallery. The show was called Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things) and consisted of twenty six pieces screened on cathode ray tube monitors, all the same model and only slightly larger than the one I'm looking at now. It was the way it was installed that gave the show its fish-tank feel. The artists had sunk each of the monitors into specially constructed gallery walls at eye level. On each monitor Wood and Harrison performed short scenarios, both dressed in similar dark non-descript outfits. These scenes, played out in small minimalist sets and shot from a single static camera position, were about two or three minutes long and repeated on a loop. This gave the impression of display cabinets with little men moving about inside, like laboratory animals under observation.

In one scene, there was a view of the corner of a grey painted interior. John Wood was standing in the room, completely motionless, holding a large electric leaf blower with the nozzle aimed at a white rectangle on the wall. The scene remained the same until the sound of the appliance suddenly stopped, at which point the white rectangle floated down from the wall and settled on the floor. On another monitor, Paul Harrison was standing facing a door in a wall. He opened the door revealing a waiting plank, which fell forward, coming to rest on his head.

Most of the tasks performed by Wood and Harrison were reminiscent of scientific trials or perhaps demonstrations of physical laws. But the artists never came across like the authors or investigators of these experiments; they looked more like volunteers or willing guinea pigs recruited for the job. In another 'box' both men were standing to the right of the screen on what looked like a shelf, which was so thick that they resembled ornaments on a mantelpiece. They stared at the viewer with blank expressions. Then the shelf dropped down on the left side causing the left-



hand figure, John Wood, to slide all the way down the shelf but all the while keeping the same posture and attitude. For some reason the other figure, Paul Harrison, remained where he was. Was it because his shoes did not have slippery soles? The pieces were ambiguous and enigmatic. And they had, like most dead-pan humour, an element of pathos.

I've seen many individual video works by John Wood and Paul Harrison over the years (more than I thought), at video art screenings and festivals and so on; but each time I've witnessed a new piece I've somehow slotted it into the memory of the Chisenhale show. I tend to see their work as a collection to be shown in a collective format. Because I've been mentally adding each new work to the collection of works experienced at Chisenhale, the show seems to have expanded out of all proportion.

It's interesting that Wood and Harrison went on from the early 'one-idea-per-monitor' pieces to develop 'string-of-ideas' works (collectives in themselves), like The Only Other Point (2005), Shelf (2007), Night And Day (2008) and most recently 10 x 10 (2011). The different framing strategies of these pieces in many ways address the changes in hardware technology, as flat screens and projection have become the norm.

In these works there's less of a sense of material and physical containment of the image. They're analogous to views from a window, the traditional function of a painting's frame, which the modern flat wide screen seeks to emulate. In these works different scenarios occur as redecorations or rearrangements of the same space or like the changing locations and events seen from the windows of a moving train. In 10 x 10 the effect is like peering into the rented rooms of an office block and at the ghosts of its occupants, seen from a descending lift mechanism or a window cleaner's cradle.

The arrival of the 'box' or 'TV set' was the most important and significant moment in my early development. It also made me into a video artist waiting to happen.

Thinking about Wood and Harrison is making me think of how I feel about televisions in general, and the role they have played in my life and in the lives others of my generation, who grew up with them from the very first time they appeared in homes across the land.

Most early TV shows were staged as theatre analogies, knowing full well the visual effect on home viewers. Many were shot in real theatre settings or were attempts to transform our TV sets into approximations of theatre by means of peculiar trompe-l'œil visual tricks.

'The Morecombe and Wise Show', for instance, was presented as though we at home had front row seats and were part of a bigger audience (who we couldn't see but whose laughter we could hear all around us). For large sections of the show stage curtains

were drawn behind the two comedians, which made the screen depth really flat. They told jokes to us and kept us waiting before revealing the set, which for a long time was a mystery waiting deeper inside the 'box of showbiz tricks'.

The earliest TV sets were wooden box-like pieces of furniture. Some of them even had doors on the front.

"Who's on the box tonight?" We used to say.

As a child I seem to remember cutting out a square opening in a cardboard box, sticking it over my head and putting on a show for my parents. I did impersonations of comedians and TV presenters.

Many TV shows, with their three-walled sets and fixed camera views, were (and a lot still are) full of theatre analogies. My kid's eye view of it was often as a sort of electronic indoor puppet show.

In Bruce Forsyth's 'Generation Game' there was a magical sequence when curtains across the screen would part to reveal a section of conveyer belt on which, one-at-a-time, a series of prizes would pass by the window of our TV cabinet. Contestants on the show would win whatever they could remember from the procession of prizes, whilst we at home would attempt the same task, somehow projecting ourselves into their shoes and amassing an imaginary accumulation of wealth.

It's interesting that Shelf (2007), which similarly presents a series of passing objects on an apparently endless motorized shelf, is not about memory but about living permanently in the present. At one point a line of twelve identical travel clocks passes across the screen. Each one's alarm is going off as it reaches the hour and each clock's time is one hour ahead of the one preceding it.

Our realisation that we've witnessed a beautifully 'static' representation of the movement of time is soon forgotten as the next scene unfolds. Further along the shelf the side view of a model train carriage on a railway track comes into view. The shelf takes us along to where the front engine is attached to it. Having reached the engine, the train and its load begins to move and is now travelling along its rails in time with us. As we track the moving train a car, stuck across the tracks in the train's path, comes into view.

The train hits the car and carries it along.

The train and car come to halt as we reach the end of the track, where three emergency vehicles, police, fire and ambulance are parked.

A preordained historical narrative is told to us as present moments along a developing timeline.

People had budgies in cages, parrots on perches, goldfish in bowls and small acrobats performing on the stage of the London Palladium on their sideboards.



Shelf (2007)

My grandparents, always creatures of habit, had special cloth covers to put over both the birdcage and the TV before going to bed at night. At the time, this little ceremony felt normal to me but now the meaning and function are baffling. It definitely had something to do with the 'blackout' routines they must have adopted during the Second World War.

First they would draw the window curtains. Then they rolled the carpet up. Then they put a tin screen in front of the dying embers of the fireplace, covered the budgie with a special 'cage cosy' and finished off by shrouding the TV cabinet with a green sheet of curtain material. Reality was rolled up and put away.

When old televisions went to sleep their glowing rectangular images would collapse and be reduced to an intense white spot at the centre of a black screen. That spot often remained on the screen for a good thirty seconds before finally blinking off.

I insert the DVD of Wood and Harrison's Blind/Spot (2007) into my player deck and settle back to watch it.

The screen is completely flat white with a black circular spot in the centre. The image holds for a second or two then, with a sharp sound like the shudder of a release-mechanism, the white screen and its black spot slides up to reveal behind it a new white screen with a new black spot. This holds briefly, and then the same thing happens again. By the third or fourth sliding up of the screen we begin to see what the mechanics of the situation are. We are looking at a series of sprung-loaded roller blinds hung one behind the other and released one at a time. As each screen rolls up the next screen seems to be smaller in size due to the perspective of the box-like corridor in which they are mounted. As the white-walled interior deepens as it is revealed, it begins to resemble the booth of a firing range. The black spots on the screens start to look like targets and the sounds of the screens rolling up are like the steady shots of crossbows firing off.

The corridor is not endless; the last screen hangs against the rear wall (or from where I'm watching the back interior of my television). This final screen does not roll up. Instead everything in the image fades to white except the central black spot, which persists on the screen and we realise we are back at the start. This is confirmed when the black spot slides up and the whole process starts over again.

As soon as we experience further loops of Blind/Spot we are able to see more clearly a simple optical trick being performed, the black spot image in the centre of each roller blind screen is in fact bigger each time to counter the effects of perspective. This is why the size of the spot on the TV screen remains the same throughout.

As I understand it, the piece is usually exhibited as a video projection beamed onto a lightweight roll-down screen standing in open space, the complete opposite of the 'boxed' version siting

squarely on the table of my studio at the moment. But chunky or wafer thin, I don't think it matters.

The more I look at Blind/Spot the more the black spot appears to be a black hole, a 'way in' (or 'way out') rather than a barrier. The conundrum at its core is that as the screens are released, revealing the limitations of the space in which they are located, so it is that the black disc depicted on each screen becomes more like a visual aperture, a palpable abyss getting deeper all the time...

On re-entering the kitchen the sound of a snooker cue striking the white ball catches my attention. When I look to the small LED screen that sits on the top of the refrigerator, it is completely green with the close-up of an 'action-replay' in progress. A white ball descends from above to strike a pink ball situated at the apex of the triangular cluster of red balls. Neatly, two reds, from each of the bottom corners of the pack, head off on separate paths toward the pockets at bottom left and bottom right of the screen. Both balls disappear and all feels right with the world.

