

Interview with Warren Burt at Monash University, Melbourne. 11/10/11 by Chris Meigh-Andrews.

CM-A: I have been fortunate to see some of your early video work. Can you give me some background?

WB: My history as a video artist: I was an electronic music student at the State University of New York at Albany from 1968-71. While I was there Tom DeWitt, film maker and video artist, was Artist-in-Residence. He showed us that we could plug the Moog synthesiser into an oscilloscope and make imagery, so that's where I started. I wasn't interested in illustrating the sound, but in making imagery for its own sake. I would also make sounds, and put them together. I would occasionally do a didactic piece where both the sound and the image would change simultaneously, but not often. The main aim was to assemble both images and sounds that were products of a semi-random process that the composer steered in real time. I went to the University of California at San Diego for post-grad studies (as they call them here in Australia) between 1971 and 75 and while there I was a member of the Center for Music Experiment and Related Research. Part of my research was building the analogue electronic music and video studio. We had a little video encoder box from Steve Beck which had RGB (red green and blue) inputs and H & V (horizontal and vertical) and composite sync outputs. This was perfect because we had an analogue synthesizer - a Serge Synthesizer, which could take sync inputs. The oscillators would lock up very nicely in sync. In 1973-75 I made a number of video pieces with that. Just to name drop, Ed Emshwiller was Artist in Residence (in 1974-75) and we collaborated on several things. I was also a member of a vocal group called the Extended Vocal Techniques Ensemble (EVT) and I have in my archive probably the only remaining copy of something that Ed and I did together which is members of the Extended Vocal Techniques group clowning around while we had 3 cameras on them - one red, one green, one blue shooting from different angles. This created a kind of "false colour pseudo 3D" at the point of convergence, and a triple image (in false colours) at other points. So, for example, when one member of the group mock-strangled the other, she would go (makes strangled face) and moved her head towards the camera, so you'd get three heads...(laughing.)

I came to Australia in 1975 and I was one of the people who set up the Music Department at La Trobe University. Keith Humble was the prof then. He had also been on the faculty at UC San Diego. He imported me and he said that we should also have a video synthesiser. I agreed and we bought an EMS Spectre from England.

CM-A: So you had a Spectron! I know the designer of that machine- Richard Monkhouse. You must have had an early one, because the name was changed quite soon to Spectron. After it was first marketed

WB: In fact that Spectre/Spectron is somewhere in a storage unit somewhere in Melbourne, because once the Music Department eradicated their analogue electronic

music and video studio sometime in the mid 80's, it was acquired by the video artists Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli and installed in their South Yarra studio. I collaborated with them on several pieces, in which they used it, and even used it in pieces of my own when it was in their studio. In fact, for a while, I borrowed it and had it in my studio in Elwood in 1997. In late 2000 they moved to Bali, and I presume the Spectre is still in their storage unit in Melbourne somewhere.

Going back to the 1970s, in the La Trobe studio we had a Spectre and camera and I made a bunch of abstract pieces. In fact some of the pieces you saw from 1979 (Five Moods) some would have been made on the Spectre, while some of them were made on a Hearn EAB Video Lab in the video lab at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in the states, which Tom de Witt was working in at that point, I had an Australia Council grant for two years which enabled me to hop between Melbourne and Troy, NY (where RPI was) and various other places doing video work and made a number of pieces both at La Trobe and RPI and mixed them all together later in Sydney, with Stephen Jones.

So I was at La Trobe from 1975-79, & 81, and then I went freelance, but even then I kept in contact with the people there, and I was able to use the studio and continued to make work there. In 1986 I was invited over to International Synergy, an Art-Science research think tank in Los Angeles. I was Artist in Residence there for 6 months. They had a Fairlight CVI.

CM-A: Which is an Australian machine.

WB: Yes. In Australia I didn't have access to any institution which had a CVI, but in Los Angeles, I did! At IS, I made a two-hour video and sound piece called "Meditations". which was composed of 24 five minute pieces.

CM-A So has this just been recently edited together- after all this time?

WB: I showed it extensively on videotape, but with Stephen Jones, we're now converting everything to digital. Between 1998 and 2004 I've converted all of my analogue tape sound pieces to digital. Since then, sporadically, when time, access to technology, and budgets allow, I'm converting all my video work to digital. And at the moment I'm also converting LP's to MP3 - so it never ends! I suppose sometime before I shuffle off this mortal coil, I'll have to convert all the digital format things to whatever else will have been invented by then.

CM-A: This is perhaps something for later, but I'd be interested to know whether you felt there was a difference between those two ways of storing information, whether there's an aesthetic difference – a quality that affects the way you think about what it is you are doing.

WB: Oh, absolutely. I would say so. There are certain times when I care about that difference and others when I don't. I'm not like say, Arthur and Corrine Cantrill,

filmmakers in Melbourne who won't even do a video dub. Mostly, they insist that you have got to show their films as film. When the film wears out (they don't make copies of their work on Super8 because of colour transfer difficulties (which I have also experienced)), that's the end of the piece- which is fine by them.

I made 3 feature length Super8 films between 1979 and 1983-84. One was made with a friend in California, Ronald Al Robboy, called "Der Yiddisher Cowboy" which was based on Isaac Raboy's novel of the same name, early Hollywood films of the same name and all the Marxist art history that has happened since then. (And to bring it up to date, Ron has continued to research the Isaac Raboy / Yiddisher Cowboy mythology since then. It turns out that Isaac Raboy was a distant relative of his, and Isaac's son, Mac Raboy, wrote the Flash Gordon comic strip for many years, and I just made an electronic music piece based on panels from one of Mac Raboy's Flash Gordon strips, and the connections continue. Except for the fact that this stuff all happened before the term was invented, I'd say this project is as good an example of a rhizomatic structure as anything else.) I also made two other Super8 films: "If Structure is an Empty Glass," which combines conceptual art comedy with environmental music and film making, and "Nature" which is five landscape films, each of which approaches the problem of landscape film in a different manner.

CM-A: So you are still very much engaged with all this stuff.

WB: Absolutely.

CM-A: Ok, so I have some questions that may not be relevant, but you have this trans-Atlantic, or trans-Pacific way of working. When you first came over to Australia and began working, ideas were initially perhaps transplanted here from your American sensibility. I wonder if there was anything that came out of your experience of Australia that fed into the work you made here?

WB: Absolutely! I couldn't have done any of the work I made post 1975 without the experience of Australia. The first big video work I made here was "Nighthawk Part 3-Bittern." The bittern is a little marsh bird and also a town down on the Mornington Peninsula. That piece is totally about the Melbourne physical and media environment. I had never seen newspaper hoardings before - so out came the Super8 camera and I used single frame animation to make lots of different word collages and those became the foregrounds / backgrounds for "Nighthawk:Part 3 - Bittern." Environmental footage of an 80 minute tracking shot - filmed from the train from Melbourne to Bittern - became the backgrounds / foreground (the relationship between the two was fluid). Sticking the camera out of the train window was possible at the time because the trains had windows that would open. So I had the Victorian Railways provide me with a large regularly scheduled dolly. That video and the Super8 film were mixed together, and we then fed this through the Spectre.

CM-A: So originally you were shooting half inch B&W? Portapack?

WB: Yep. This material was then coloured with the Spectre, and we had a whole bunch of algorithmic electronic stuff controlling the colourisation, which was finally recorded onto a 3/4 inch mater.

CM-A: So as you've said your first encounter with video was in the States- pre 1975. You've talked about working with sound, Super8 film. What were the things about video that attracted you to it as a medium to work with?

WB: It's quite simple, with the electronic generation of images; the most simple and direct way to record those images was with video. This is a good ten years after Doug Richardson in Sydney was making computer graphics and shooting them onto film with a telecine machine. Video technology had become more accessible, so it was much more practical and much more intrinsic to the electronic images to record them on video. I was making electronic images, which were controlled by the same (at first) analogue and (later) digital electronic processes. The music tradition I came out of was a Cageian tradition, and a Xenakisian tradition, if you will, and this meant that we were constantly thinking about what sort of electronic compositional processes we could assemble. For example, the old Moog at Albany had 6 or 10 low frequency oscillators. If you mixed those together you got a complex fairly unpredictable pattern that you could apply to sound or to image. If you apply 3 of those low frequency oscillators to Red, Green and Blue, you could have incredible changing colour sequences. Apply another two or three of those to aspects of shape, and pretty soon you are algorithmically generating images. Today this would be called "generative imagery".

CM-A: So would you say that the principles that you learned from electronic music were fundamental to what you did with video- that there was a direct relationship there?

WB: Yes, a one to one structural relationship, although a lot of the art itself wasn't using a one to one relationship between the images and the sounds. I would make a video track and independently make a sound track and then put them together, because we are also dealing at this time with a Cage/Cunningham idea of independence of sight and sound. My other main form of activity at that time was collaborations with dancers, all of whom were post-modernists. You may remember a group called "Strider" in England in the mid 1970's - all but one of them came to Australia; and I worked with all of them. One of them - Eva Karczag, I am still working with to this day. Although it's been about 5 years since we've worked together because she's in Holland and I'm here.

CM-A: Yes, that makes it difficult!

WB: Although I did do a soundtrack for her a few years ago. But that's not the same as getting together to work on something and laboriously hammering out the form of the piece, and then suddenly while working together something beautiful happens.

CM-A: This interchange between sound and picture is something that the Vasulkas were excited about. I wanted to ask which came first, or perhaps it doesn't work like that?

WB: The answer is different for every single piece.

CM-A: So sometimes you'd have a piece of music you wanted to create images for, and sometimes it was the other way around.

WB: Yes. And sometime not even "to", but "with". For example, there is a video piece called "Monks Mood" in "Five Moods," and what came first was the music in which I was creating an automated kind of process, which recombined materials from Thelonius Monk's piece, "Monk's Mood." This was quite tricky in the old analogue synth days when you've only had a few sequencers but, having made that, those same sort of rhythms are then involved in making the abstract graphics that went along with it.

Actually there is a piece which uses a real one to one structural relationship, called "Duo" which is the first movement of "Even Five More Moods Yet." ("Moods" has 15 movements, and is in three sections: "Five Moods," "Five More Moods," and "Even Five More Moods Yet."). In "Duo" I wanted to do a real hard edge constructivist thing- just squares and verticals and various colour things. Its amazing when you are trying not to be representational - I was seeing things like street lights at night by the ocean in the patterns, but it was all just very abstract images. At the same time I was writing a piece for trombone and piano ("November 18th") for some friends and I noticed that I was using the exact same processes in sound and picture and thought can we put this sound with this picture- although I realised I had to make an electronic version of the sound piece (instead of the expressive instrumental version) to match the stillness and bareness of the electronic imagery.

In another of the "Moods" - "Hawk Call and Whale Cry", I first began working with the Hearn EAB Videolab - having it modulate a grid. The minute I began working with it, I thought "Oh, that looks like a hawk." I had this hawk and nighthawk obsession at the time so I made a process that used a nighthawk cry and I worked with the two together- listening and doing synthesis at the same time.

CM-A: Did the Hearn generate some of its own patterns? I recall that the Spectron did.

WB: Yes, the Spectron generated lots of patterns and you could also put analogue synthesisers through the Spectron.

CM-A: Was the Hearn similar?

WB: I'm trying to remember. We had two things. The Hearn generated patterns- it was basically an analogue computer that was patchable. Then there was the Rutt-

Etra, which was an image modifier. I'm now remembering that the majority of "Hawk Call and Whale Cry" was actually made with the Rutt-Etra. Plus at that point there was an engineer named George Kindler who was working with Tom De Witt. They had invented a thing called the Electronic Pantograph. It was considered very complex then – it was a chroma-key and tracking device. You put dots, or white areas on a dancer's body, and you could do various keying and tracking things with it. I remember working with Eva Karczag. We put strips of tape on her clothing so that when she moved there would be this ghostly image which we could then grab and do all the standard tricks with. Mostly I enjoyed turning her into a field of dots, and then modulating them so that her shape would re-coalesce out of that. She would dance using a piece of music of mine that we had produced in collaboration. We played that in the background and she danced with that – but never to it.

CM-A: So you were doing live- performative pieces in which we would see the live images you were generating and the live source as it were?

WB: Oh yes, although that piece with Eva I just referred to was a piece for video alone. But here's a fun story. Just before I came to Australia, in San Diego, I was working with a dancer named Kim Pauley and we came up with this idea that she would be sitting on a very tall stool (she was a very small dancer) and a camera would be aimed at her head and shoulders. We would electronically modify this image, stretching it, blurring it, etc. as a live performance. The piece was called "Narcissus." While we did this we were playing a sound that she would be working along with (not matching rhythms or gestures, etc.). So the audience would see Kim on the stool, doing a very slow "sitting dance," our live video modification of the image, and be hearing electronic sound. (The sound was a fairly low growling texture, if I remember correctly.) After the performance, Kenneth Gaburo, who was one of my mentors, came up to me with this satirical dirty old man leer on his face and said, "Sorry Warren, but no one in this audience was going to see a thing of what you did with the video or even listen to the sound - Kim was so spectacular!" Yes, we'd gotten this striking dancer to do incredibly beautiful moving – so who cared what was on the screen or in the speakers, the body always wins!

CM-A: Did you show this work on TV screens or were they projected?

WB: Yes, that piece was shown using a single TV screen, but in 1981 we did a thing which was prosaically called the Melbourne City Square Video Show. There was a big video screen there, which for a few years they allowed artists to use before it reverted to being used solely for advertising, then they closed it down because they couldn't make money with it. But at the beginning they had all these weird artists doing things. For Moomba, a Melbourne Autumn Festival, I organised a whole group of people- Philip Brophy, David Chesworth, Garry Willis, Eva Schramm, Robert Randall, Frank Bendinelli, Chris Mann, Chris Wyatt and myself, and we had the screen for an hour. It was all done live on the big screen. Some people, like Eva Schramm, Gary Willis, the Randellis, and Phil Brophy had their work on tape ready to go, so we just pressed play, but other things were live. For example, Chris Mann,

Chris Wyatt and myself did a piece called "Snodger Lip Lap"- it's a poem of Chris', going back and forth between Gaelic-sounding words, Australian English, and abstract sounding fragments which he performed live and while he was doing that, we had a computer treated version sound tape where every word was backwards (in the order of the text). This was accompanied by a video performance which had the text, written on clear sheets of plastic, treated with a feedback process with the Spectre, so the text which was being performed was also fragmented and stretched and pulled all over the screen. The documentation of this performance was made on Super8 film, shot by Arthur Cantrill.

CM-A: Were there other artists working with video that influenced you?

WB: Well, we have to talk about personal friendships here, because one of my best buddies at that time was Bill Viola. (In fact, his wife Kira Perov was a friend of mine and I introduced them. I'm responsible for them meeting.).

CM-A: You curated a show together didn't you?

WB: Yes, in 1977, Kira and I curated a show together called "Video Spectrum". That's when Bill first came out to Australia, and first met Kira.

CM-A: That is quite early on in his career as a video artist, isn't it?

WB: Yes. The early works are beautiful, but in terms of the larger field (and I say this without any negativity) they are nothing special. For example, when people say: "Oh Laurie Anderson!" I go: "She's nothing special. I remember her back in New York in the 1970s- she was just another performance artist from the gang." Of course, the work that both of them have done since those days is just astounding..

CM-A: So you and Bill were influential on each other, I guess.

WB: Oh yeah.

CM-A: He came out of a music background too, didn't he?

WB: The difference is that I was basically a student of Joel Chadabe and Kenneth Gaaburo and he was basically a student of David Tudor. And he knew Nam June, who was very influential on him.

For example, another thing I did in my last 6 months in California was that I got very involved with members of the Southern California Women's Video Collective, and worked as technician for some of their pieces. In fact, they had a show that toured Australia and I was instrumental in going to the Ewing Gallery and saying "write to this person, write to that person" and the show finally happened. So I was trying everything I could to try to get interesting stuff from there to come down here, and to get interesting stuff from here going over there.

CM-A: So you were a catalyst.

WB: Yeah.

CM-A: So you started off as a composer and a musician

WB: A composer, musician - and a weaver. From my earliest years I was just doing whole bunches of things. I haven't done fabrics in years, but basically anything that involves process and manic behaviour. Computer programming seems to take care of that job for me now. (laughs)

CM-A: So do you have any kind of engineering background?

WB: My father was an electrician and electrical engineer who wanted me to go to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and study computers, because it was the new thing coming in. Being a rebellious child, I of course went and studied music, and then about 1978-79 I taught my father how to record. He was an amateur harmonica and ukulele player, and by teaching him how to record, I created a monster. (laughs) He eventually got a whole electronic music studio at home and he would make backing tapes for his buddies in the Capitol District Harmonica Society, of which he was the president!

CM-A: So you were a kind of animateur. Getting things shown and showing the work of others- getting people together, etc. So this question of where you first showed has been covered. Were there other Australian artists who were important to you?

WB: Yes. Most important at that point was Chris Mann - poet, philosopher and composer; Ron Nagorcka, composer, Stephen Jones, video artist, and Eva Karczag-choreographer, who was also involved with all of those other people. The lines were so fluid at that point. It was not: "Oh, you're a dancer, you're a musician..." In fact, a number of us felt that we were simply artists- full stop.

CM-A: The divisions were irrelevant.

WB: Yes. Tim Burns. Although I never had very much to do with Tim personally, I was very influenced by some of his early work - for example "Car-nage".

CM-A: Where would you have seen that? I am curious about this, because if it was anything like the early days in England, it was not easy to find this work, you had to actively seek it out, so I'm wondering where in Australia you'd go. I suppose the institution you were working at...

WB: The first port of call would be the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, which a number of us had set up as an alternative space, which showed film, performance art, video, some dance- music was just an umbrella. That went from 1976-83. That

was one place, another was La Mama Theatre, here in Melbourne, which didn't just do plays, but had music and video and poetry nights and multi media and installations.

Then there was the Pram Factory Theatre. And the Why Not Theatre. The Ewing Gallery at Melbourne University was very active at that point - it was practically an alternative space, within the context of the university. And as long as Kira Perov was at La Trobe University, Union Arts there was really active.

CM-A: Was she working there?

WB: She was the Activities Officer for La Trobe University Arts. She was a photographer, and had gotten a job there as a curator, and she was looking for "weirdos" to help her put things on. (laughter)

CM-A: And there you were...

WB: Yes! There I was.... And where else? Monash Gallery out at Clayton had stuff happening - even the National Gallery in Melbourne was interesting at that point. There was an American artist living in Melbourne called Bill Fontana - now internationally known as a sound sculptor. He did a number of things at the National Gallery here. Places were a lot more open then. Maybe, if you are 26 and talented they are open now, but back in the 70s, things seemed to be open and it was easy to find venues. Melbourne has had this history - since the 80's- the 1880's, of having a lot of alternative spaces and alternative activities. As an example, Alfred Deakin, who in his later years was the 2nd Prime Minister of Australia. In his early years, he was an engineer in Melbourne and he had a hobby of psychic activity, and every week on a Monday he would sit down and "channel" a short play, which he and his friends would rehearse on Wednesdays, and on Friday night they would perform for what became the Victorian Spiritualist Union. One of the people in his plays was, I believe, Tom Roberts, a painter, who also did some acting. They did this every week, for about a year and a half, and that's in the 1880's.

CM-A: So there's a spirit of that! A lot of this is a specifically Melbourne experience. Did you find that Australia was like that- did you have a cluster of activities in Melbourne, a different one in Sydney, and did the artists talk to each other, or were they really quite separate communities at that point?

WB: They talked to each other, but there is the tyranny of distance. A number of us did a lot of travelling

CM-A: Yes, you had that in the states- the West Coast/East Coast thing....

WB: Yes, there was a similar thing. Rodney Berry, a composer, sound sculptor and artificial life investigator, who lives in Hobart now, said something revealing. In the early 1990's he was living in Sydney. I was visiting him, and he said to me, "Warren,

you've got to understand about Sydney, it's not one city, it's four cities none of whom talk to each other." I've noticed that Sydney really does have these rigid walls between scenes, although it's now getting a bit more porous, whereas Melbourne has always been porous. Here's an example. We had been living in Wollongong, outside of Sydney for a couple of years. We were visiting Melbourne, and were sitting in the lobby of the Victorian College of the Arts waiting to meet a friend, and in the 10 minutes before she showed up we met about 10 other friends, all of whom in the Sydney scheme of things would have been in separate scenes. The very next day I got an e-mail saying "Concert coming up", and the cast list was everybody we'd met.

CM-A: So this kind of multi-disciplinary scene was very particular to Melbourne.

WB: Yes. There was also a lot of stuff happening, for example, at the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, and there were a number of interesting things happening in other cities at interesting times. (As the Chinese curse goes, "May you live in interesting times"). But of course things go up and down. For example in Melbourne 1984-85 was a pretty drab time, and then things popped up again. Sydney seemed to be going through the doldrums in the 90s, but now it seems to be popping. It varies from time to time. Adelaide was very interesting in the 1970's, I don't think so interesting in the 80's, but then very interesting again in the late 90's and early 2000's. And a similar thing could be observed about the progress of the arts scenes in Brisbane, which is now a very lively and interesting place.

CM-A: A lot of activity, or a good audience for it, or both?

WB: A lot of activity and a lot of audiences come along.

CM-A: Around this issue of audience, I have a question about video being accepted as an art form. Were people open or resistant to video?

WB: I'd say they were open to it. An example is between 1977, to about 1983, the National Gallery in Melbourne had a little black room on the 2nd floor in a pretty prominent place, which had video going, full time.

CM-A: Showing all kinds of stuff! Who was programming this?

WB: I think it was Annette Dixon. I'm not sure. I think that later Jennifer Phipps might have had a hand in it.

CM-A: So there were particular curators who really took video on.

WB: Yeah, and it also depended on who was young, ambitious and pushy. At that point the Randellis - Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli, were very ambitious and ended up with a number of shows. Another would be Phillip Brophy. He was extremely active and got a lot of work out there. You know, the art world basically responds to the "squeaky wheel getting the grease" theorem. If you are just quiet and

work away at home- who cares! No one is going to notice you – just you and your ten friends and your mother's dog. Whereas if you are always out there organising things, then people notice that – you know, the “snow ball” effect.

CM-A: Were there any pressure groups?

WB: There was an organisation in Melbourne called “Access Video”. Stephen Jones would know more about that. I was sort of remote to that. I was teaching at La Trobe and I had access to equipment through its media centre. By the way, Stephen Jones' book – “Synthetics: Aspects of Art and Technology in Australia 1956-1975” (MIT Press 2011) is an absolutely essential text for understanding the background for all this work.

CM-A: Were there different factions or groupings within the scene; Political/Social, Abstract/Musical, and say something parallel to Painting/Sculpture ?

WB: Yes, absolutely. Peter Kennedy, for example would have epitomised the idea of video as a medium of social change, I would have been someone who was more akin to the painting circle of people. Malcolm Ellis, who is still with us, although he hasn't made any video art in a number of years, was more interested in video as a quasi narrative satirical thing. So for example, he made a piece called “The Clayton Earthworks”, where in his best Robert Hughes manner (with the bow tie and everything) he talked about this magnificent construction and built a fantastic castle in the air, and used close-ups, etc. Finally the camera pulls back to reveal that it's a construction site where they are building a new service station. Pulls the rug right out from under you! He was more interested in those kinds of satirical things- sending up art theory.

CM-A: Well what about the theory side of things? In my experience, one of the problems with early video was that there was no one who write about it. So what ended up happening was the artists themselves did the writing. Was that pretty similar here?

WB: Very similar. There was a very interesting book called “The Judgement of Paris”, which is about the introduction of French theory into Australia and New Zealand. In the late 70's there were magazines such as “Arts Melbourne” (more the straight artists) and “the Great Divide” (Marxist criticism) and “Lip”, which was feminist. So there were a number of art magazines, and some of them were really radically opposed to each other, but what you had with all of those and the dynamic between them, both here and in New Zealand, was that there was a sort of antipodean understanding of theory coming about that got demolished with the introduction of French theory. Once French Theory took over, it was an interesting case of self-cultural imperialism. There were no French armies coming in and saying “You must read Roland Barthes”. And I'm not criticising Barthes, but it just swept away so much.

CM-A: It was very popular in America. I think I'm right in saying that it was very

pushed by American academics.

WB: It might have been, but the first I encountered it, aside from having done graduate studies with Kenneth Gaburo, who was very connected to the linguistic side of things, was when Paul Taylor started the magazine "Art & Text" in Melbourne, as a means of introducing the stuff into the Australian context.

CM-A: What date are we talking about?

WB: 1979-80.

CM-A: So are there Australian writers who you would identify who wrote about your work and artists who were part of your group?

WB: No. That was me doing that writing. Because my work didn't conform to the theory and also I was 10 years too old. There were people who would write about Phil Brophy and David Chesworth - someone like Adrian Martin, who was the same age as them and was writing about his friends - (no criticism of Adrian). But I was an older generation and so I was not part of that.

CM-A: I think it is right to say that you are part of that first generation of video artists, and those artists didn't get written about very much. Now, of course, we're doing something- not just me but lots of people, but there has been a long delay. As you said before- you can make work, but it doesn't necessarily go anywhere, but sometimes, the writing can help, because a lot of people encounter the work first (and foremost) through the written page.

WB: Speaking of theory- I have this theory called "The Life of the Work of Art in the Theatre and The Life of the Work of Art in the Media." I'll give you 2 examples. First example- Madonna. I say Madonna and you already have an image in your mind. I then ask you about some aspect of the orchestration in her song "Spanish Love." Very few people except those who are knowledgeable enough to listen with an ear for that would notice that. So that is the life of the work of art in the theatre, but everybody knows Madonna.

My own example: In 1997-98, I made a piece called "Diversity", which was a piece of political theatre, a collaboration between myself the late Sylvia Staehli. It involved me (a non-dancer) moving and video projection and singing - extended vocals mostly. So I was singing, speaking, moving, we were doing video projection and using interactive technology. We went to the Victoria State Government to get funding for it. They told us they would fund it, but that we would have to add another third to the budget to pay for a professional publicist. We said fine-Sylvia knew a professional publicist. The publicist did a fantastic job - she got interest from radio stations who would never have looked at me before this, for example. At the end of the show, she did a survey and the quesstimates were that a million people in Melbourne had at least seen or heard the name of the production. We filled the theatre for 4 nights. 250

people had a nice time! So, the life of the work of art in the theatre, we did a good show for 250 people; the life of the work of art in the media, a million people know the name, if nothing else.

CM-A: Yes, that's an important point.

WB: I remember I wrote an article about one of my pieces in Cantrills Film Notes, which had a lot of circulation in the film and video world. Then I got a lot of requests to show the piece.

CM-A: Here's a tough one for you. Are there, in your opinion, any unique aspects to the Australian context for artists' video?

WB: In the early days, when I was really involved in it, what was unique was the fact that everybody was talking to each other and there were lots of small venues and people were trying things out like crazy. I would go overseas and I would see a similar energy in a couple of other scenes from time to time, but that sort of energy really seemed unique to say, the Melbourne-Sydney axis.

CM-A: You are the first artist in Australia I've talked to, so it will be interesting to see how this builds.

WB: See if other people agree with that. It depends on their attitudes. At that point I was young and enthusiastic and full of energy and really wanting to work across boundaries and personal divisions. Somebody else might say: "I never talked to them - we were all divided and it was all terrible at that point."

CM-A: It's at least partly about the way you worked and the people you were working with.

WB: And part of that would be the ideas we had in setting up the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre. It was an anarchist organisation- no money was to be paid to people for doing things- composers or performers. You had to do it all off your own bat and all the organisation was up to you. All we provided (whoever "we" was at that point) was a co-ordinator and some rudimentary publicity. Because there was a lot of energy for all those years from people who wanted to do things, it really exploded, and that was just one place- there were other places that offered similar sorts of opportunities. It really provided people a context from which this exploration could take place.

CM-A: That's the other part of all this isn't it- building your own context. Because there was a sense in which, coming in with something so new, so open and so different, meant that you had to create a context for it.

WB: In 1973 I had been in California working in a pretty high-powered place – doing video and sound poetry and music and so on. I went to London and met this young

mathematician and he was saying “You know, electronic music is really on the “outers” at the moment, but once Boulez gets his centre in Paris, then you’ll see things really take off! “ And I thought to myself, oh yeah right, Pierre. He came by San Diego about two months ago with his buddies and they were talking about setting up this centre in Paris and they were looking at what we were doing at CME, and I thought, who needs Boulez- just do it on your own! I noticed that there were certain people in the scene, who really wanted to get the Arts Council imprimatur on what they did and really get into the galleries and really make it an establishment thing. Then there were others, (and I’d count myself amongst them) who just said lets just get on and do it in our own little venues and build our own little culture, and let the establishment go off and do their own thing. I think both approaches are valid, but certainly at the time, I was more interested in making art happen rather than gaining imprimaturs for it..

CM-A: Let’s just finish up with a little bit about the way you worked, and a little bit about this question of digital and analogue. It seems to me that you came out of the music and electronic manipulation of sound, saw the parallels with video and wanted to explore and play with the relationships between the two. You said something earlier about digitising everything you had done, and I am wondering if you could say something about that.

WB: It is still possible to buy the basic TTL circuits, and solder yourself together a nice little project. A friend of mine who lives outside Florianopolis, in Brazil, just designed a very nice drum machine using all those little circuits, and if you send him \$50 US he’ll sell you a circuit which is basically a drum machine and a sequencer. He could have done it with software, but he wanted to do it in hardware- its “cuddlier.” (<http://www.beat707.com/>)

Here’s what’s happened to me anyway with the digital/analogue thing. Inside my computer are dozens of programmes. Some of them I actually wrote myself, or helped with the development as software and so on. I don’t treat those programs as separate self-contained things. Each of them, at least conceptually, is a module in my larger compositional system. So, in the old analogue days- here’s your oscillator, your filter, here’s your amplifier, etc. I can plug those together. This wire can go into a TV set, but it could also go into a loudspeaker. OK, there are different rules about what is going to happen, but each module basically has an electronic function and those functions can be combined in various ways.. Today, I have all of these modules, one of which is an Oscillator, another of which is a Sound Modifier Plug-in, another of which is called “Corel Photo-Paint,” another of which is called “Vegas”, and each of these modules I can connect together either real time or sequentially - I do this in this programme, that in that programme. So my whole approach to the digital world is that it has just become an expanded analogue vision and sound synthesiser. That is, whether the machines were digital or analogue, we’re still dealing with systems theory.

CM-A: That’s an interesting model. I could see, when you were describing that, Dan

Sandin with his Pith Helmet on demonstrating his Image Processor. So you do the same thing conceptually with the computer.

WB: Yeah, basically the question is A: What is the principle behind each module and B: What are the compositional potentials- what pieces do you see lurking within the capabilities of that module, rather than, "I've got this idea, what can I use to realise it." Here's a new thing, it does this, this and this, what are the principles behind it, can I think of anything that is implied by new thing?

CM-A: OK, well, the other aspect of the digital that I latch onto, is what it enables the artist to do in terms of his/her audience. There is this question of audience- we talked about it when we were saying- once you make something, what do you do with it? The digital has, I suppose given us this other potential audience- we can put this on line, or on You Tube....

WB: Yeah- in 2009-2010 I had 3 video installations. One at Kinross House - Toorak Uniting Arts, one at The Frankston Arts Centre and one Wollongong University Art Gallery, but basically these days everything I do with video immediately goes up on my web site. In fact almost everything I do sound-wise also immediately goes up on my web site.

CM-A: Is there a difference between putting it out on the web like that and the experience in the gallery?

WB: Well for example the one in Wollongong, which was the best, had 3 big screens, each screen 3x3 metres – Cinerama basically, with 6 loudspeakers. So it was the size of the space and the whole of the experience which was special, which is very different than the You Tube experience.

My wife parodies me and says that basically my studio is in there. (points at netbook computer) This is my studio at the moment. So there is the question of scale...

CM-A: But does that make you think differently about the work/ So when you are planning or thinking about making something- making it to go out on the internet or making it to be experienced on the sort of scale for the gallery is very different.

WB: There are some practical things. For example, there was this beautiful Lissajous pattern thing that I got going and I made a You Tube video of it and its still up there, but I'd rather take it down because all the beautiful fine detail is lost on that small screen. On a TV screen its adequate, but actually I realise that piece really needs a large screen, because there is a lot of fine grain structure in the visual textures which is lost on a smaller medium.. So there's practical things like that.

I did two little video pieces back in April ("City Night Rain" and "Easter Colour Mix") with raw material from my cell phone camera and then made two versions- a DVD version and a You Tube version and so if I ever get it together, I can make a DVD

and show those in various places. But until that time, people can see a representation on the web. There is another difference though with the web, and the music industry is very aware of this, because all the music labels are suffering. But things like You Tube should strike terror into the hearts of video and art gallery curators, because with the free mass public distribution available on the web, we don't need curators any more. It would be nice to play with them-, but they are not essential. I don't need a curator's permission to have 50,000 people see my work. But I still need a curator's permission to have access to a beautiful space with wonderful equipment.

CM-A: There is also this thing of the validation of the work.

WB: I don't care about that. If someone wants to see the work, I don't care whether they are a curator or a garbage collector. I'm happy for them to see it. I do recognise the power of the curator- they have access to beautiful spaces where the work can be presented at its best, and be taken seriously. But for my own sake I don't need their permission or their validation. I need people to like my work for me to feel good, but it doesn't matter which people.

CM-A; You've managed to keep working as an artist- and to keep growing as an artist and to keep making your work. Other younger artists perhaps may not be able to do that if they don't get support at the right point, I suppose.

WB: There are certainly people who I grew up with – I can think of people back in the 70's who were doing video art and they are not any more, because they never got any validation. I think that always happens- there is always attrition.

I don't know what the key is for those who are egomaniacal enough to keep going. I'm optimistic and so on, but let's face it, a lot the society doesn't give a shit about the stuff, and if you rely on that sort of approval, you are letting yourself in for a life of misery.

CM-A: You've worked across a period of great technological change, and you are an artist working with technology. So my question is which changes have profoundly affected the way you think about what you do?

WB: Absolutely. For example, encountering the Fairlight CVI really made me think about other possibilities and made me think in a different way. I could have made another leap around 1990, but because of economic reasons I didn't make that leap until around 2000, when computer video editing actually became practical. It was a great liberation because all the ideas that I could have done back in the 70's and 80's when I didn't have access to what I needed, I now could do, and I could do them in the comfort of my own home – or one could say in the comfort and privacy of my own home! Also because off and on I've been a teacher, as a teacher I have to learn a new technology every two years.

There is constant change, and I will be critical of technology and what things have done to us, but looking over the sweep of the past 40-60 years at what people have done and how things have changed, I'm thrilled.

These days there is some Japanese post-grad student doing anything you want, and they will release it on the web as a free download in the next 20 minutes! We have gone from the stage when you said "Oh, could I afford a transistor, is that transistor available, has someone invented something like that?" to total technological glut. That's got it's own problems. I'm grateful to have lived this long and I'm grateful to have been through that whole change, but in terms of the art we're talking about, it's a great time to be alive. In terms of the whole planet, well, it's a disaster. But for us, when we put our little art hat on and we go over there- it's great!

CM-A: Do you think there's an audience for this work?

WB: Oh yeah, and what's interesting, having taught intensively again for the past couple of years, one encounters, as one always did at first, the narrow-mindedness of youth. (Me & my 20 friends against the world!) But once people are exposed to all the things that have happened, 90% of them are hungry and just want it. It is a different sort of hunger. Back in the 60's and 70's there wasn't a lot of it around, in say the general popular culture, so when we found some work like this, it seemed really different. These days the aesthetic of Nam June Paik is in every TV ad and you talk about say Cage's ideas of multi-level perception and people say: "Oh I experience that when I just walk out into the street!" -which was his point precisely! Things aren't as immediately thrilling, or strange today, but once people cotton on to the thought that there's another world other than the commercial culture one they grew up with, I find that they're not only enthusiastic about that, they are hungry to find out about it.