

## Gang of Two

Artists John Wood and Paul Harrison have been collaborating for over twenty years, making works that dance along a line of absurdity, irony, tragedy and humour. They first met at what was then Bath College of Higher Education in the late 1980s, but it was only later, after they had both graduated, that they began working together. Between projects, **Emma Geliot** met them in their Bristol studio to find out more about the nature of their collaboration.



**Emma Geliot:** What's so special about being part of a duo?

**Paul Harrison:** The nice thing, about there being two of us, is when you're in the studio or off doing a really nice show, in a nice space, with nice people, it's brilliant being together and it makes it much more fun.

**John Wood:** But then that 10 per cent of the time is balanced with the other 90 per cent, where it's not much fun and having the other one there really helps.

**PH:** When I was a student, a particularly naïve student, I expected the art world to be full of people who were really kind and interested and generous and supportive and, apologies to any equally naïve students reading this, it's not quite like that.

**JW:** We sometimes find ourselves in a difficult situation or up against a difficult person, then it's great having the other one. Suddenly we'll switch, Paul will send an email and it'll completely change the tone of the

conversation. It's useful, 'good cop, ever so slightly not so good cop' – we're giving away our secrets here, so that's not going to work anymore...

**PH:** We like to think we are nice, but we can't be that nice, because nice people give up because it's really tough.

**JW:** As we get older there are fewer and fewer options to do anything else, so you just keep going, you don't have any choice, we actually can't do anything else; having the other one helps to stop this becoming really scary, at least you're not the only one.

**EG:** Do you have the same working relationship now as when you first started out?

**JW:** We had no idea when we first started that we would be working together for so long, we didn't have contracts...

**PH:** ...I wouldn't have signed.

**JW:** We had so much time when we first started, we did everything together, every strange three minute screening in Hungary, we'd be there doubling the audience.

**PH:** Now thankfully it's different, not that I don't like hanging out with John... It's just different, we're always busy. This again is where it's great having the two of us; we can divide things between us.

**EG:** Is this how you are going to deal with the shows at von Bartha and in Tokyo?

**PH:** Yes, I'm off to Basel and John's going to Tokyo, John's fourth trip out there; and I guess maybe my thirtieth trip to Switzerland. You make friends and contacts so it sort of makes sense to stick with places and projects. Though I think John would like to swap this time, because he's just come back from Vancouver and I think he's a bit knackered.

**JW:** A bit.

**PH:** I was ill, so couldn't go, so John took over. We're collaborating on a piece out there with Ballet BC [British Columbia] commissioned by CAG [Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver], so he was working with the dancers developing the work.

**JW:** So now I'm back, I'll take the lead on the ICC project and Paul on the von Bartha show.

**PH:** But we're in constant communication. We both know what's going on, I hope.

**EG:** Sounds like you are busy. How do you carve out time to experiment and maybe go against what people expect of you? Can you take that time out?

**JW:** It's always a balancing act between making work and showing work, and the tons of other crap that you have to deal with; but we always make the time.

**PH:** The big shift in our practice, in the last five or six years, has been a move away from purely screen-based works into other stuff. These things – objects, drawings, photographs and other things, we don't know what to call – have always been in the studio, it just took us a while to get them out.

**JW:** We started extremely tentatively in the IKON show with a few drawings and objects and weird things alongside, predominantly, video work. It was interesting because, at that point, we'd been making video for 15 years, and so had all that experience, but we didn't really know what we were doing with these new things.

**PH:** It re-invigorated the practice I think, we felt like we were starting over, but we made some huge mistakes and some terrible works; I mean really awful.

**JW:** But that's part of it, failing is a positive.

**PH:** Unless you do it all the time...

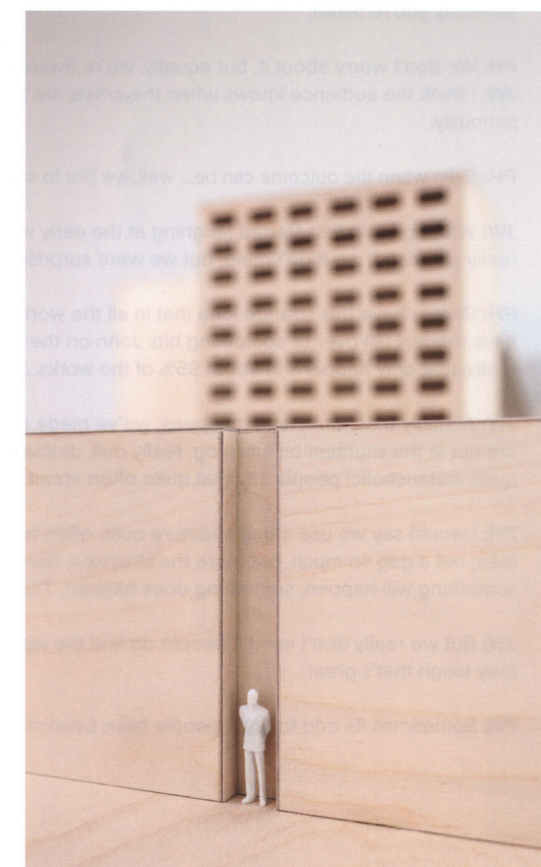
**JW:** We didn't try to fail, I mean we really tried to not fail. We would plan and draw and try things out. Often we would think 'we've got it'. What do we call it the night before when we think we've cracked something, and then we come in the next day and it's shit?

**PH:** False dawn.

**JW:** But now, we do have a bit more experience with these new parts of the practice and we're almost really quite confident, in a quiet way, that the von Bartha show will work out well.

**PH:** I hope so, because I'm going to be the one at the private view...

**EG:** I've managed to sidestep the humour question: a lot of artists struggle →







with being labelled as being funny, because it detracts from the how seriously you're taken.

**PH:** We don't worry about it, but equally, we're aware of it.

**JW:** I think the audience knows when the artists are taking what they do seriously.

**PH:** Even when the outcome can be... well, we like to say, 'slightly amusing'.

**JW:** When people first started laughing at the early works we were really surprised; we didn't mind, but we were surprised.

**PH:** People have this strange idea that in all the work, every piece we have made, I fall over or something hits John on the head; *The End*. And really, that only happens in about 95% of the works...

**JW:** Actually that hardly ever happens; we've made a lot of works which are not in the slightest bit amusing, really dull, deliberately so, or often quite melancholic; people say that quite often about the works.

**PH:** I would say we use a gag structure quite often to deliver the idea; not a gag so much, but more the structure; here is something, something will happen, something does happen, *The End*.

**JW:** But we really don't mind if people do find the work funny, and if they laugh that's great.

**PH:** Sometimes its odd though, people have been crying with laughter,

I mean totally losing it, when that happens we tend to think that maybe they should get out more...

**EG:** There seems to be a requirement of art to entertain rather than trying to make people think. I like the idea that you're not delivering on that, to actually step away from that and allow the slow burn.

**JW:** I'm not sure I agree completely with the question...

**PH:** No, I think all types of art are being made now and have been made at all time. There is a temptation to see things as part of movements still. There are a lot of extremely dense works being produced that, say, you might see at a biennale, but also a lot of fluff...

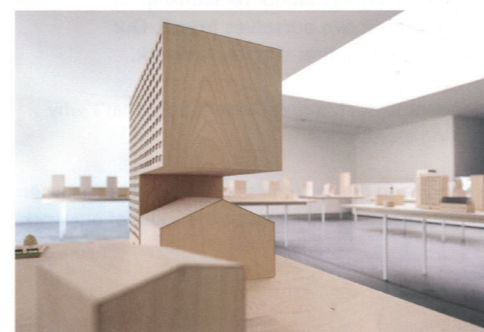
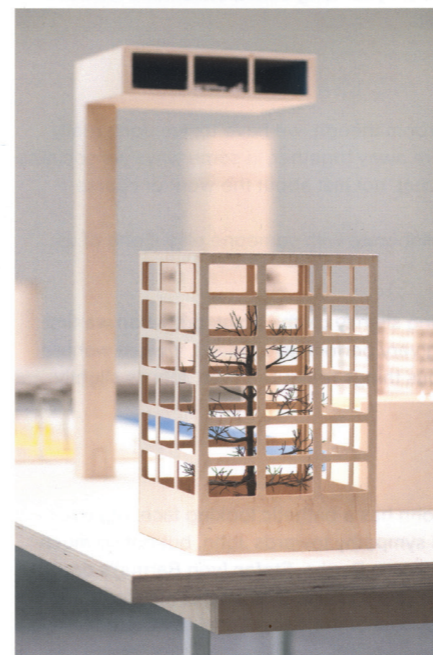
**JW:** That you might see at an art fair?

**PH:** Yes, I think it's fun to show the dullest work at a fair. You're supposed to show colorful things that spin around and make a noise, so showing a life-size photograph of a ruler, for instance, as we did at FIAC [Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain] once is sort of fun, in a perverse way.

**JW:** It didn't sell...

**PH:** Obviously not...

**JW:** Art fairs clearly do have an effect on some art production, so I guess in a way you are right with your point about entertainment. We always try



Installation images: *Some Things are Undesigned*, John Wood and Paul Harrison, at von Bartha, 2015, courtesy of von Bartha & the artists. Photos: Andreas Zimmermann.

p21, top: *13 Assassinations*, John Wood and Paul Harrison, 2013, 7'00" HD, single channel, 16:9, edition of 5 (plus 2 A.P.s). Courtesy the artists and von Bartha

p21, bottom: *Collaborative Portraits*, Harrison and Wood, for CCQ, 2015. Technical facilitation: Gáston van Mülders, photographic assistant: Megan Winstone

to make work that operates on several levels; I hate that phrase, but you know what I mean. Maybe, going back to the humour, we sometimes use that to engage people, sort of a hook, then you have the viewer and other things can take over and develop.

**PH:** Maybe art fairs will be less important in the future, even now people talk about there being too many...

**JW:** The thing that we've noticed – and what's interesting about having a longish career – is things come and go, and come back again. What is important now might not be so important next year.

**PH:** When we started off everything had to be made on a TV quality format, big production values etc., and then there was this period of low budget, and now things have come back around. It's interesting for younger people who haven't seen that. Three years ago, you couldn't move for 16mm, now everything's shot on 4k with a crew and budget that would keep us going for four years.

**JW:** A lot of things now are overinflated and overblown and some of it's great, but most of it isn't.

**PH:** No one seems to be making short little videos...

**JW:** Just us.

**PH:** We're stubborn I guess.

**JW:** Or deluded.

**PH:** Or wrong.

**EG:** How does your work evolve? Do you arrive at a point together?

**PH:** We draw.

**JW:** A lot.

**PH:** Most days.

**JW:** It's not a proper job.

**PH:** Sometimes a work will come from one drawing. Sometimes it's a drawing from the week before combined with a drawing from ten years ago.

**JW:** We use drawings to clarify our ideas to ourselves and to the other one. A drawing means it's out there.

**PH:** There is no taking it back and if it's a bad idea, we can spend the next twelve months reminding the other one how bad it was.

**JW:** It also depends on the work. For instance, in the von Bartha show, we are going to exhibit a few finished drawings from the 500 drawings series; it's a series of 500 drawings... We don't even run them by each other, they just appear.

**PH:** But with a video work, or, say, with *A film about a city*, also in the von Bartha show, that kind of work takes months, years even.

**JW:** Endless drawings and discussions, and those discussions are important obviously. —>



**PH:** Another reason why it's good to work with someone, they are always there to talk to, to throw things at; not physically, well not often physically.

**JW:** The other one acts as a filter, hopefully getting rid of the bad ideas.

**PH:** Not always.

**EG:** Because you know each other, you can circumvent what the other is going to hate. I'm trying not to compare it to a marriage, but you can cut out a lot of crap in the middle.

**JW:** Are you suggesting there is no crap in a marriage?

**PH:** I'm consciously aware that we try to surprise each other... even if we do know what the other one will like or dislike.

**JW:** Are we still talking about a marriage?

**PH:** We obviously know each other very well, but we don't know exactly what the other one is thinking, we can't see inside the other one's head. So in that way it is like a marriage... Again, that's why we use drawing to try and clarify what we are both thinking.

**JW:** We have developed a kind of shorthand, over the years, almost little catchphrases that we use to save time.

**PH:** But sometimes, we get it very wrong; we can still really fail to communicate, be on different planets.

**EG:** Have either of you wanted desperately to do something and haven't been able to because the other wasn't keen?

**JW:** The thing I most want to do is retire to a garden shed...

**PH:** Because we're not precious about ideas, maybe exactly because you can't be if there are two of you, we tend to think that if we don't do 'that' we'll do something else just as interesting.

**PH:** That's not to say we're not driven to do certain things; we are, but I think that's just how we work.

**JW:** We still have time, though it is running out, to do a lot of things. So, if we don't do something now, we'll do it next year. It's also a way to test the strength of an idea, sit on it for a while, if it comes back up and still sounds good then maybe it's a keeper...

**PH:** And I think if one of us really wanted to do, say, plasticine modelling, there's quite a high chance that the other will say 'okay'.

**JW:** I'm not so sure...

**PH:** What's really nice, is that when one of us is away working on a show or something on our own, the other is always in the background, backing you up. But you still have to make decisions on your own. We don't submit them to the panel of the other.

**JW:** So we do have a kind of independence within the practice.

**PH:** We just have to trust each other.

**EG:** Have you ever, in 24 years, contemplated doing solo projects?

**JW:** I have been for the last ten years. Paul doesn't know.

**PH:** We're too busy, and we really do enjoy what we do and the fact that we get to do it together, it's a fantasy job, the best one in the world. It's like being an astronaut and it's great having someone to share that with.

**JW:** There is only so much our other partners will tolerate, and believe me they are tolerant, but after a while they will tell us to shut up.

**PH:** But we've been having a 24 year long conversation and we haven't got bored yet... well, I haven't.

**JW:** ...

**PH:** We do give each other room though, we have to; we don't really socialise, except when we are away together, in some ways we socialise in the studio, hang out and chat, not just about the work of course

**JW:** I can't imagine we'd collaborate with someone else if one of us died. It would just be weird.

**PH:** It's funny, and this is going slightly off the point, but when we first started and we were making very performative videos, we just wanted to be stick figures, anonymous things really. But then John is slightly smaller than I am...

**JW:** Quite a bit smaller...

**PH:** People have said that John has a pathetic looking face, big eyes – open somehow. People feel sympathy towards John, but not so much towards me. Whenever I go to von Bartha, Stefan [von Bartha]'s dad's first question is 'Is John here', and I'm like, 'No, it's just me, sorry'. John's the nice one. That's why I do most of the commercial dealings.

**JW:** I think what Paul is trying to say, is that our relationship, or friendship, is the work, we can't remove ourselves from it. Our personalities and the way we are together shapes the work.

**PH:** So we are interdependent to such a great extent now, that's why we don't think about working alone.

**JW:** Obviously one of us is going to die first, unless maybe it happens when we're making a video... If you died it could increase the value of our work.

**PH:** Yeah, not by much...

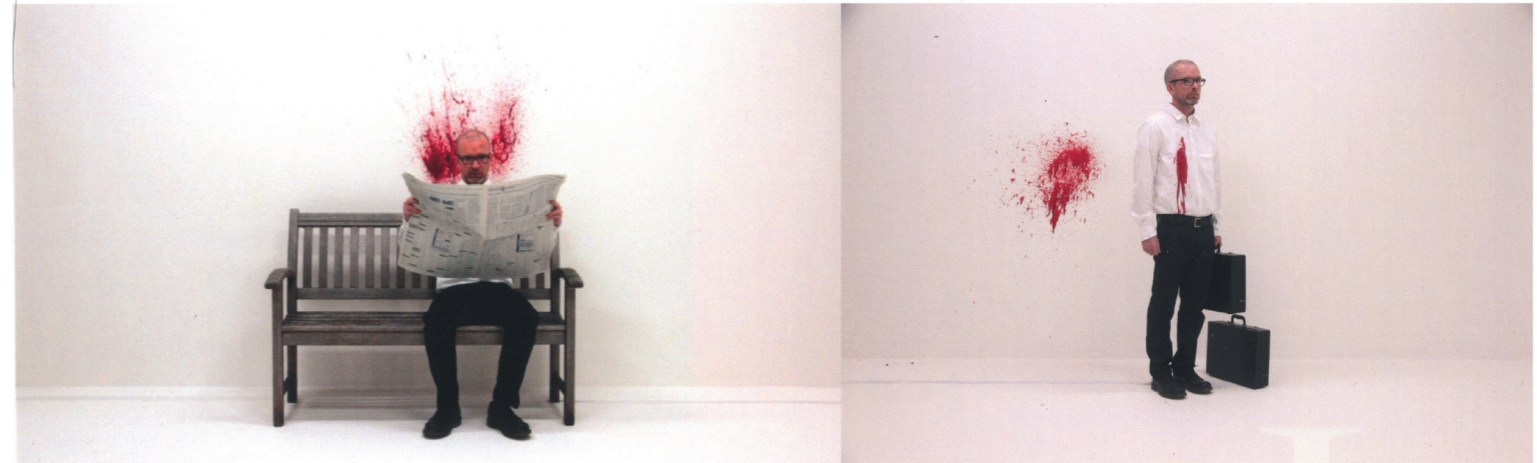
**EG:** So how do you make a living?

**PH:** We made two classic mistakes. Firstly, there are two of us so everything gets split 50/50 after the gallery takes its percentage...

**JW:** Although to be honest almost all the 50% we get from the gallery goes back into making work, so we actually get something like a fifth for a salary.

**PH:** Our business motto: 'Cover your costs, break even...' Our second mistake, we make video. Which sells, but not for much and not that often.

**JW:** Those were really bad business decisions...



**PH:** ...Which we don't regret, because we are having a great time, admittedly in a poor sort of way.

**JW:** We both teach very part time, which gives us a degree of self-sufficiency, because we don't have to sell work to live and that gives us a lot of freedom to make the work we want.

**PH:** We work with five commercial galleries and do sell quite a bit, but not enough so we make anyone a lot of money, and in a way that removes us from the pressure of having to make works that sell.

**JW:** Yes we don't get that, 'make me ten more of those', mainly because the first one didn't sell anyway.

**PH:** We don't have to worry; we've always noticed that children tend to really like the work, so in thirty years time when they have all grown up and some of them have become collectors...

**JW:** ...We're going to be loaded.

**PH:** The art world is quite tough, and sometimes you have to remind yourself what the good bits of what you do are.

**JW:** Really it's when you get an idea, then you work out it's perfect formal resolution, well as near to perfect as you can. When you do that and this thing pops out and it just works... well that feeling is worth a lot of cash.

**PH:** It's actually not.

**JW:** It's worth a lot of something...

John Wood & Paul Harrison: Some things are undersigned *is* at von Bartha, Basel 07 Nov, 2015 – 23 Jan, 2016  
vonbartha.com

John Wood and Paul Harrison: Some Things Are Hard to Explain *is* at the NTT Intercommunication Centre, Tokyo 21 November 2015 – 21 February 2016  
ntticc.or.jp

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