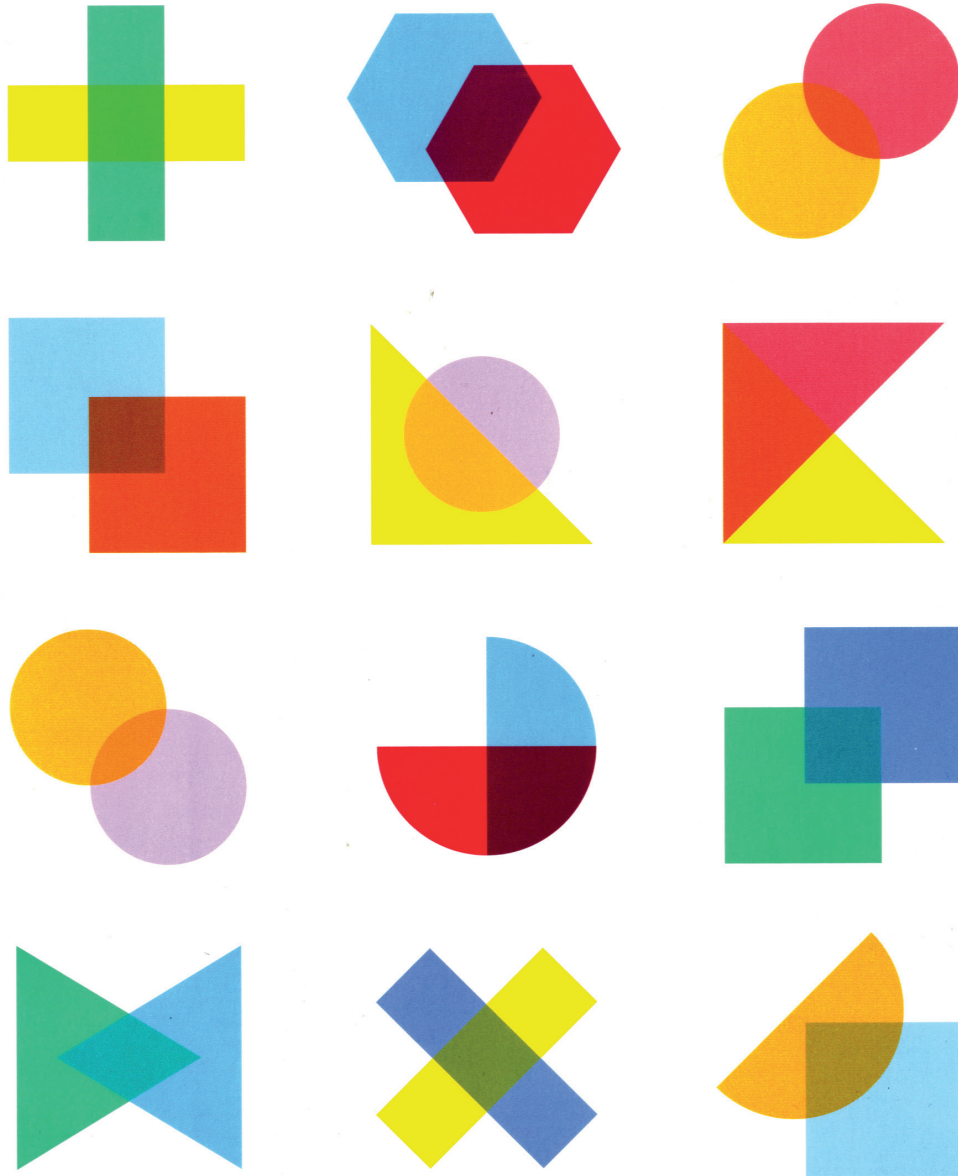


# Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration



PHAIDON

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# John Wood and Paul Harrison

John Wood (b.1969) and Paul Harrison (b.1966) met while studying at Bath College of Higher Education, UK, and have worked together since 1993. Their video works primarily show the artists performing simple acts that resemble games or challenges in which they interact with one another and various materials and machines, utilizing simple shifts in size, lighting and position to great effect. An ongoing investigation into the physical properties of bodies – particularly their own – and of materials underlies much of their work.

In their first work, *Board* (1993), they are shown manipulating a wooden board across a white space, taking turns leaning on it and supporting it. It's a seemingly straightforward performance, but the interaction of the two men of different sizes and builds raises the issue of individual personality and produces subtle comic effect. In the more slapstick video *Three-Legged* (1997), they are bound together with rope below the knee and filmed trying to avoid being hit by mechanically fired tennis balls. These actions allow the viewer to project their own interpretation on the exact nature of the collaboration – or conflict – being staged, while the artists' deadpan expressions lend an absurd quality. For *Bored Astronauts on the Moon* (2011), Wood and Harrison mocked up a realistic moon landing in their studio and acted out the inevitable consequences of embracing boredom.

Although they are best known for their video work, drawing is a central component of their collaboration. It was the basis for planning and making *Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things)* (2001), which was shown at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, and is now in the Tate collection.

In person, the wry humour that pervades their work comes to the fore. In an interview interspersed with frequent bouts of laughter, they explained the nature of their professional relationship and friendship. Having worked together for over twenty years outside of the art metropolis of London, they are keenly aware of the pressures on young artists to compete for opportunities. They speculate that their longevity as a duo might in part be the result of their distance from a competitive urban art scene, which in the early days meant fewer expectations about selling work, enabling them to produce it without worrying about market value or popularity. Being based in the more affordable city of Bristol has also allowed them to have a bigger studio, enabling experimentation on a larger scale.

Did the idea of working together come up as soon as you met?

**Paul Harrison** We met when we were studying, but initially there was no connection in terms of working or collaborating together. We just met. It was a relatively small college, so you did get to know most of the people who were there and we were all aware of what each of us were doing.

**John Wood** Perhaps the one connection we did have is that we were in the painting department and neither of us was painting. In those days, the 1980s, we were the minority.

**PH** A year after graduating, in 1991, I was on a two-year residency in a school. I vaguely knew John and he contacted me to ask, 'Can I come up and visit?' We arranged some teaching for John and he came to stay for, I think, two weeks.

**JW** While we were kicking about we decided to do a performance together. I'd made videos of performance things at college, but I'd never done a live performance. The first one, in fact all three were pretty awful but we thought, 'Oh, maybe we could do another thing', and then we spent the whole summer doing it. We never said, 'Let's spend the summer doing this.' And there was no conversation, or decision that 'We're working together now.'

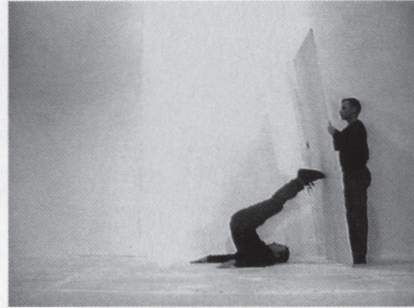
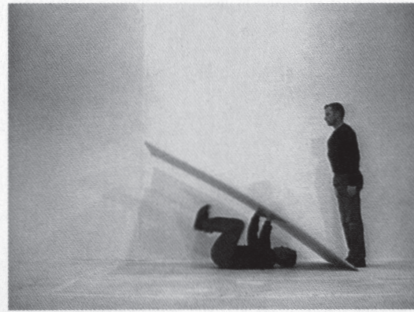
Was there a moment when that relationship as a duo crystallized?

**JW** We never had a formal discussion about whether we should carry on. We'd finished two pieces of work and while I was away for six months in Africa, Paul applied to a couple of film festivals, the work was accepted, a small thing in a way but a key moment, and I remember them saying, 'Are you Harrison and Wood, are you John Wood and Paul Harrison, are you Wood and Harrison?' and so we thought 'Well that's happened, we're a duo!'

Was there a specific work that helped you realize something about how you might want to continue a collaboration, or how things might continue but with a difference?

**JW** Primarily, it was *Crossover* (1993) and *Board* (1993) that were shown in the first festivals.

**PH** I clearly remember we made *Crossover*, which is a piece of work that we don't really show any more now, but it was the very first piece of work that we



Board, 1993  
Stills from S-VHS, 3:02 min

made. A few weeks later we were in the pub, it was lunchtime, and John had a sketchbook. We were going through and he'd done a drawing of a board...

**JW** ...with a stick man.

**PH** Yes. I was thinking, 'What shall we do next?' And I distinctly remember saying, 'That one looks really good, let's do that one.' It felt like a big difference, between having made one piece of work together and making two. The second piece feels like more of a commitment. So for me, that was one key moment.

**JW** We made most of those early works by putting the camera on and just filming stuff. We went into the studio, got a board, a piece of eight-by-four foot MDF, and just filmed hours and hours of possible movements using our bodies and the board. We would improvise much more than that we do now. After the residency we found a studio in Shropshire, a huge old barn, which was beautiful but really cold and damp and so in about 1998 or '99, we got a studio in Bristol. Because this new space was clean and sort of heated we could transfer drawings from our sketchbooks and put them up on the walls. We'd always worked with drawings but now we used them as part of the process of editing. Before we'd start filming, we could both see the overall structure of the thing

## 'There's no such thing as an artist who doesn't collaborate.'

we were working on. We could draw over each other's drawings, move them around, take them down, make new ones etc. This was a shift in how the work was made. Drawing became the method by which we devise a work.

**PH** It also became the way in which we communicate with each other: it helps to clarify things. Even after working together for so long we consistently misunderstand each other. We can talk through an idea for hours, and hours, and hours then, say, John will draw it up and I'll be like 'Oh that's what you meant'. So we have to try and make sure that we get to the point where we are both on the same wavelength. Sometimes that process throws up interesting and unexpected things, when one of us sees things totally differently.

It's nice, that idea that at certain moments one or other of you is presenting and the other is consulting and you keep swivelling that relationship back and forth. Are there things that one of you is better at it than the other or do you just swap tasks?

**PH** Art. I'm better at art than him!

When we first started, we would do everything together, because we had so much time, when no one was bothered or interested in our work. We did a lot of film festivals initially, and we would travel together for three-minute screenings for twelve people. We'd do sessions in the studio when we were both there for twelve days at a stretch. Then slowly, as we got busier and had more commitments, around the early 2000s, it started to become clear that we couldn't both do everything because it was just not an effective way of doing stuff.

**JW** But also, there were things that neither one of us was good at or could do.

**PH** I'm not aware of those!

**JW** In those instances, we would each take specific things, I don't know how or why. Paul does our print and design stuff, I edit the videos.

**PH** It's interesting how much is affected by your personality or your circumstances... For example, John's got a kid, so when she was really young it made a lot more sense if there was a long-haul trip, which are usually planned well in advance and organized by an institution, for a week or ten days or whatever, that John would do it. I haven't got a kid so it would be easier for me at the drop of a hat to go on lots of short trips.

And on another point concerning our personalities I'm not as nice as John. People really like him.

I think you're pretty equal on the likeability scale.

**PH** Give it time.

So, because I am not as nice I do a lot of the day-to-day dealings with the commercial galleries. It's not like John's excluded at all, but it is quite useful if something is going wrong, John can come in and it can throw people or change the tone of a discussion. With some of the galleries they don't see John for eighteen months.

**JW** It's like I'm a fictional character.

Do you think galleries are wising up to artist duos or collectives or do they still feel a need for a solo brand in order to sell work?

**PH** I wonder if a bit of that has gone, that idea of the single genius, because: look you can have two... The mechanics of relationships with others can be complicated because there are two of you, and people want to see you as the same person, or believe that you think the same about everything, and clearly it doesn't operate like that. It's those differences that make the collaboration interesting, but for galleries, maybe it's bit more difficult to read.

**JW** It could also be that the mediums that tend to be more collaborative, such as video, have been hard to sell historically for other reasons. It's only been in our working lifetime that video became something that galleries would even take on. When



Bored Astronauts on the Moon, 2011  
Still from single-channel HD (16:9), 20 min

we left college, it was still phenomenally difficult to even see artists' video. You would have to go to LUX Centre in London, or screenings at the ICA, or to the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and they'd have some videos there. Of course we are talking about the pre-Internet world here.

Did either of you ever consider making work alone?

PH We realized quite quickly, when we started to work more seriously and recognized it was going to be ongoing, that we didn't have time to do anything outside of that.

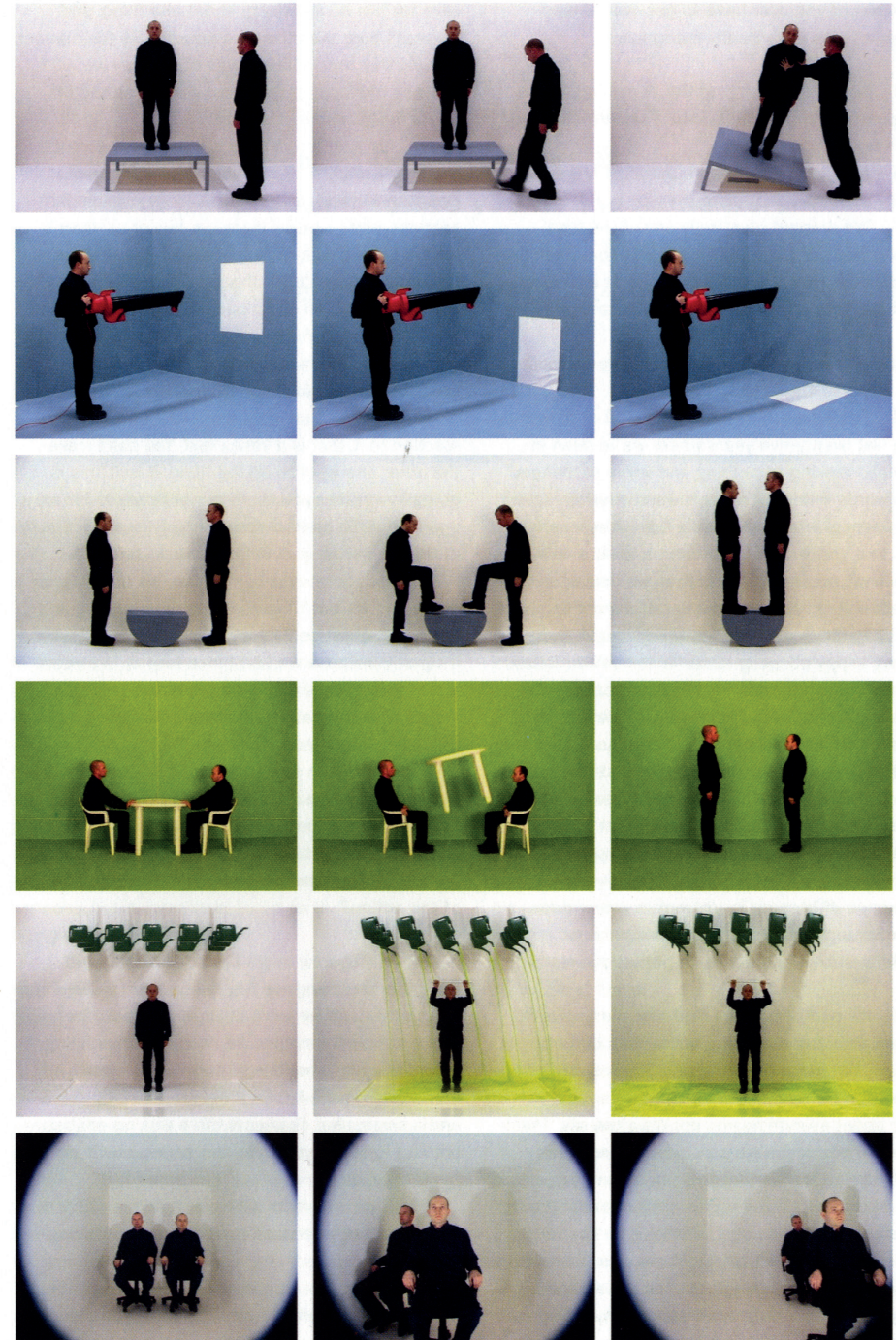
JW I had no desire to do something on my own at that point. I felt that what we were doing, the work we were making, occupied all my thinking, time and energy. Plus, I would always be drawing in my sketchbook on my own anyway. If you think that what you are doing is the best use of your time, the most fun and the most brilliant thing you could be doing, why would you want to change that?

PH When we made *Twenty-Six (Drawing and Falling Things)* for the Chisenhale Gallery in east London in 2002, which is a single work made up of twenty-six short films, we constructed a method of making one work in which we could each have our own little bits within it, but it was still collaboration

because we would go through hours of discussion and thinking before each piece was made. Just having the single idea, 'Here is a drawing of a thing', is not the work, it's the start of it. By having these works with multiple sections, there is a bigger scope, so we thought, 'We can chuck this idea in, and this idea, or let's combine these two.' We still do that now. There are other mediums we have started to explore, especially drawing, making finished drawings that are not drawings made for a video work. They allow us more individual freedom and we don't run those past each other. It's like, 'Here's drawing number 143.'

JW Pretty much every single thing in our videos has gone through some sort of discussion between the two of us, whether it's the lighting or choosing the sound to edit in or what we're wearing. These go through what we call 'filters'; basically double checking everything, allowing things some time to see if they still feel right the next day or week. Whereas with the drawings, we have two series of drawings, 500 on A4 and 500 on A3, and we basically decided that was the format and then we just drew, mostly on our own, although even some of those have collaborative aspects, for example, Paul will lay something out for me to do on the computer.

PH And John will colour it in!



Twenty Six (Drawing and Falling Things), 2001  
Stills from Mini DV, 26:59 min

Did either of you ever have to get over a need or desire to be individually recognized?

JW No, I think for me, at the beginning, it was a purposeful thing, political with a small 'p': 'We are not a single...'

PH A lot of the early work particularly was actually about collaboration.

JW We dressed identically and at the time it was important to me that it was not about being an individual. Now that doesn't bother me so much, but at the time it felt like more of a statement.

How do you resolve disagreements over works?

PH There have only been a handful of moments in the last twenty-five years where we've been in the studio making something and we've exchanged sharp words with each other, always when we have been under external pressure to complete something. When that happens, it lasts about a minute, one of us goes off, comes back and then we immediately joke about it. We had a discussion this morning about something that happened yesterday that we were not very happy about, an external thing. We realized instantly that what we do as a way of coping is that we switch it back round and make a joke out of it. We have various catchphrases that we use. It's often about something someone else has said that has stuck with us. We have hundreds of things that people have said over the years that we will just drop into conversation and make the other one laugh.

That sense of humour is present in your videos, and other works whether it's as slapstick or absurdity, surreal situations or pathetic jokes.

PH It's part of how we deal with things. We're not junior doctors, we're not under that kind of pressure, but to maintain the practice and our enthusiasm for it is tough. It's tough to always be public about everything you do. We often say, 'Thank God we're not doing this on our own!' because there's someone else that you can offload on – or with – about certain things. It's not just about having a division of labour to deal with things – 'You take that on and you have that', it's about when something goes wrong, or something goes really well, and you have someone to share that with. You can only talk to your partners, your other partners, so much before they get bored. John and I know we can sit

here for five hours talking about one thing, and we won't bore the other one about it. So the humour, outside the work and in terms of the way we work, is a way of stopping ourselves getting pissed off about things.

JW On a different theme, in terms of conflict, there isn't really ever conflict in the work itself. Because we work with multiple ideas or multiple sections, and because there are two of us, there's always been a lack of preciousness about ideas. If the other doesn't like the idea, you just think, we'll do it later, it'll come back in another form, and you might keep bringing it back, trying to slip that idea back in. That's the primary thing, a lack of preciousness about ideas. On the whole, if one of us doesn't like an idea, warm to it or show much reaction to it, that is a litmus test. You can't make the other one want to do the thing, it isn't 'this is going in whether you like it or not'. It has to be an agreement. So conflict doesn't really exist because of the way we have decided to work.

PH It's not really in our natures, we don't like to argue and we don't like to waste time arguing and because we get on very well, we're friends. Maybe it's partly because we had those four or five years making work, early on, with no pressure and no money... We had a long time when we just got to know each other.

Do you embody a certain politics or philosophy in your work? Is collaboration that philosophy, or is it about the absurdity of life or the way actions can tell stories that go far beyond the simplicity of the action?

JW Philosophy might be too strong a word. From the beginning, we felt that we were presenting information and we were doing it in a really factual way that wasn't emotive. We weren't manipulating the audience's emotions through using certain music or dramatic lighting. We used a static camera and a single shot. For years there was no editing, nothing to set the pace, to shock, no speech or facial reactions.

PH Over the years we have bent and pushed on those things because it would become boring if we didn't.

It's interesting that you mention the generic look of the clothes, because I wonder about this anonymous figure. Sometimes you just see the

**'The mechanics of relationships with others can be complicated because there are two of you, and people want to see you as the same person, or believe that you think the same about everything, and clearly it doesn't operate like that.'**

torso, or just hands pouring and the body in the video is understood as a cipher. How does this tie in to collaboration and negotiating individuality and ego?

PH Initially we wanted the videos to be as close to the preparatory drawings as possible, black and white, grey and white, or dark on white. We wanted to be stick figures. But after a while we realized that was impossible. We found that people saw us as two characters, maybe because we are different heights and John has big eyes so people saw him as the fall guy and they warmed to him. Someone said John always does the dangerous, nasty things. In most of the videos we've made, nothing dangerous or nasty happens, but it sometimes looks as though I'm being evil to John.

How has the response to you working collaboratively changed over the years?

PH Early on, our work was dismissed for all sorts of reasons, for example, not perceived as being serious enough. It's difficult to keep going, especially early on, if you get negative responses...

JW ...But being in a duo means you've got back-up. You don't necessarily start to completely self-doubt and think that you'd better change what you are doing completely or join the Marxist party. This 'strength' or as we sometimes say this 'self-delusion' also comes from our individual personalities, not just from being together. We're phenomenally stubborn and single-minded in this thing we're

doing and it becomes easier when there are two of you and you've got someone who believes what you believe. Because there are two of you, you can be more single-minded, if that makes sense? But equally there's a split personality to us that makes us more open to things. It's a dual thing in that it makes us more of a gang, but more open at the same time.

PH I think there's no such thing as an artist who doesn't collaborate. We collaborate with all sorts of other people, it's just that we have a special, ongoing, inbuilt collaboration. I try to explain this to my students, 'You won't be in a room on your own, or if you are, you'll be very lonely and unsuccessful and you'll never exhibit your work.' It's all about that play-off with other people and your ability to get on with them, and your ability to be plonked at an art world dinner and talk nicely, when you would rather be at home.

Do you build in time for play or do you have any shared rituals?

JW It's part of the process of making stuff. We used to, much more, now time is a bit more precious, but essentially play is what it is. We were in the studio last year trying to build a city. It's not a million miles away from Lego.

PH We do play ping-pong. Badly. All the time. All the time badly... and after years and years we managed to get a table-tennis table into one of our videos.