

# Ian Bourn

## A Kind of Self Portrait



*Lenny's Documentary*, 1978

I have been making film and video since the late seventies. I also write, draw and produce work that combines different media in my role as an artist. As a founder and member of the influential HOUSEWATCH group, formed in 1985, my work has involved multi-screen film projection, sound and performance, in projects designed for architecture and the urban environment. Last year, collaborating with filmmaker John Smith, I created *The Kiss* video installation in Tokyo.

Perhaps what I'm best known for, however, are the series of single-screen videotapes that include titles like *Lenny's Documentary* (1978), *The End of the World* (1982), *Sick as a Dog* (1989) and most recently *Monolog* (1998).

When I've used moving image media, it has always been a choice based on what I thought was best suited to the ideas I wanted to express. It was never a decision based on a pure love of the technology. It was based on my perception of that technology and what I thought were other people's expectations of it.

In 1978 I made *Lenny's Documentary*, a 45 minute videotape that was to typify many aspects of my working method from then on. My single-screen video work has come to be a kind of portraiture that examines role-play and the viewer's relationship with people portrayed on film. I usually act in my own work, in roles that are a mixture of fiction, social observation and autobiography,



*The End of the World*, 1982

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seeking to explore the nature of identity and identification, authorship and authenticity. Described in the Arts Council Directory of Film and Video Artists, as having a talent for “low key drama that reflects its times”, my work deliberately focuses on what mainstream cinema would regard as minor players and

marginal plots but which for me are real people in real situations, often struggling to make sense of a world from which they feel excluded.

“Through camera framing, dialogue and a supremely good ear for the language of lower middle-class life, Bourn gives us a bilious, funny and understated view of



*Breathing Days*, 1992

**“Of all art media I found still photography the least interesting (or possibly the hardest to understand), because the artists who used it seemed to be hiding. I thought clicking a button and walking away seemed a sneaky, almost cowardly thing to do”**

ourselves pitched perfectly to capture both the comic and the desperate.” Michael O’Pray *The Elusive Sign*

One possible reason I make the kind of work I do is the particular route I took through art education. “Integrated Design” at Ealing School of Art was an amalgamation of Industrial Design, Fashion, Graphics and Printing: an experimental art course that put no emphasis on specialisation and that placed students learning different disciplines alongside each other in the same studios. “Environmental Media” at the Royal College of Art was designed for students working across a range of different media, including performance, video art and on projects of a purely theoretical nature. Important for me as these courses were, if only to keep me off the streets for seven years, I think of my work as beginning at a much earlier stage, in the years before I left Junior School.

Of all art media I found still photography the least interesting (or possibly the hardest to understand), because the artists who used it seemed to be hiding. I thought clicking a button and walking away seemed a sneaky,



Performing the *Guardsman* in 1958

almost cowardly thing to do. My mental image of photographers was of men under black hoods, looking through peepholes. In contrast, I understood straight away the people and processes of cinema, with its directors, actors, writers and musicians working together, building ideas and atmospheres through sequences of images, actions and sound.

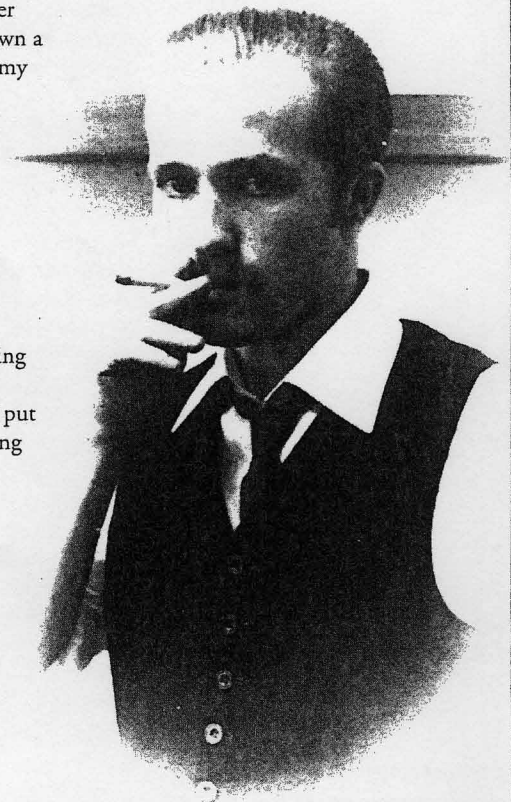
My father was responsible for this. At the end of watching a film he made sure that I was aware of

the credits and who had done what, even that someone had designed the credit sequence itself. When I was seven years old, he was already saying things to me like: “A clever kind of film is the one where you don’t even notice the music”. Through him, I could feel the film moulding and modulating time, space and ideas, actually telling me something, like I was in a conversation with the author. Most kids (and adults come to think of it) thought of films as “a John Wayne” or “a Marilyn Monroe” and chose what they went to see on that basis. So did I; but it didn’t spoil it for me, knowing that John Wayne, real as he was, was only acting under orders.

I rated painting and drawing. Photographs were just pictures of things that someone had seen, whereas in a painting, the artist was still there. No matter how representational a painting was, how photographic in appearance, the awkward handywork of its author was still revealed if you looked closely. I loved the slight embarrassment of the artist’s presence, trying to communicate with me, trying to put words together in the form of marks and gestures and colours.

In practice, I was drawing and painting first, but I think I understood film and TV even before that, because my pictures were really crude storyboards. I drew sequences. I drew television screens, then cut out the screen area and ran a strip of paper behind it on which I’d drawn a series of pictures. I got all my creative ideas from television and films. I’m of that generation who were the first to have constant access to moving image culture, at the cinema and at home. We had very few books in our house and I can’t remember much about going to the theatre. Music was important to me, in that I put records on when I was doing something creative, to enhance my mood. I understood the notion of a soundtrack. The other important things were props: items of furniture, the clothes I put on and other bits and pieces, all carefully

In a photo from the *John Lovell* book, 1974



chosen because they were, or seemed to resemble, something relevant to the 'plot' of my activities.

Ahead of me I had the vague idea I would become an artist, but this was like imagining a film of myself as an artist. It was a future role and not a career. I could draw, so I could become an artist. But I could also do impressions and I used to put on little shows for the family. I did tap dancing and puppet plays. I had this feeling I could be anybody. Whatever I did, I immersed myself in it totally and took it all very seriously.



Lenny's Documentary, 1978

**“I had no desire to develop relationships with tools. Only the relationship between myself and the world. I had a little camera, but I also had pens and paper. I had a selection of hats. To me it was a combination of things”**

I can remember standing very still, dressed in the uniform of a Coldstream Guardsman and with a rifle at my side, its butt resting on the pavement. People walking by often stopped to look at me. Many found it very amusing. But I did not move or change my expression. In my head was a tune that ran: “They’re changing the guard at Buckingham Palace, Christopher Robin went down with Alice...”

Every ten or fifteen minutes, I would shoulder the rifle and walk the length of the street, then turn and retrace my steps to the starting point, outside the gates of a local post office building. This early piece of “performance art” must have lasted two or three hours and only ended when my mother called from a window to announce that dinner was ready.

Another piece, which I performed daily for at least a week, was a version of the formative years in the life of President Kennedy. It was a work for scooter (torpedo boat PT109), peddle car (Cadillac), pavement (Boston, New York, Washington) and road (the Pacific Ocean). In it I played the part of JFK and Pamela Weedon played the part of Jackie. I did my bit in the Second World War, got wounded, got medals and eventually got elected as president. I remember the scene when Jackie and I got married. Keith and Angela Mills threw confetti over us as we drove by in our open-topped car. It had an in-built irony, because Pamela and I had planned to get married in real life. We already knew each other’s bodies intimately, but were resigned to the fact it would be at least another ten years before we could legally tie the knot. What I’m saying is that I had a notion of life “on” and “off” the screen and of the way that the line between art and reality can get blurred.

I mentioned my lack of interest in photography, because I think it is an important difference in my development from that of other artists who see themselves as “pure” film or video makers. I never became fetishistic about machinery i.e. cameras. I had no desire to develop relationships with tools. Only the relationship between myself and the world. I had a little camera, but I also had pens and paper. I had a selection of hats. To me it was a combina-

tion of things; I put a scarf on my head, painted some coins gold, drew a treasure map and listened to the wind rattling the windows. This sort of composition was not centred in a frame or on a defined stage, it was fragments of a fiction spread across a real situation. It could be intensely felt and not stood back from. Like the music in a film you hardly notice.

In the sixth form of Leyton County High Boys’ School, we had a “progressive” art master who regularly sent us off to the ICA to see modern art exhibitions. It was there that I saw Warhol/Morrissey’s *Lonesome Cowboys* on its first release. This had a liberating impact. It inspired me and some friends to start messing around with Standard 8 film. We shot rolls off, not worrying about a plot, structure or technique, just enjoying the accidental things that happened and the pleasure of seeing ourselves moving through the scratches and grainy texture of film.

I went to art college to escape having to go to work. To escape having to define myself as a “so and so” who does “such and such”.

I never saw it as education. I remember one of the first things I did when I arrived at art school was to wear a smock and beret and act the part.

I made my first video in 1972 at East Ham Technical College, a production which, as I remember, was badly lit and badly acted. The video involved me in an interview session, in which I played the role of an expert on the work of a dead conceptual artist called “John Lovell”. My interviewer was played by real conceptual artist Ed Herring. I developed a slightly better version of the piece at Ealing College of Art, where I printed it as a bogus BBC book containing a transcription of the interview. I used a friend’s face for Lovell and cast myself as the curator of an abandoned exhibition of Lovell’s work. The book contained a series of Lovell “images”, which were actually snaps from my family’s photo album.

The idea of inventing imaginary artists went on to occupy nearly all of my seven years at art college. It meant that I never had to confine my activities to learning one medium. If I wanted to do a sculpture I would be Morton

Wilcox, a West Coast American artist obsessed with filling stations and petrol pumps. I wrote science fiction under the name of Peter Van Praagh. I made a 16mm film test reel by Tristan Claude, a director auditioned by Hammer Films in 1956 for their first version of *Frankenstein*, who was quickly dropped and later threw himself off the cliffs near Lands End, Cornwall.

At one point, along with a fellow student, I became a freelance joke writer and cartoonist, writing gags for an imaginary club comedian called Wee Willie Mac Wittee. This episode was quickly abandoned because we both became severely depressed; walking around in fur coats, straw hats, smoking hundreds of Woodbines and laughing till our stomachs ached.

One of my major projects was to construct an imaginary art history. More precisely, it was to be an alternative history, based on the "accepted" one, but with everything rearranged. I would get a Thames and Hudson book and look through it for photographs of artists in group shots: for example, a gathering of surrealists at the signing of a manifesto. Then from the familiar faces, Breton, Masson, Eluard and so on, I'd pick out the not so well known ones. There

were always a couple of odd characters, people who never went on to do anything else or maybe had no real reason for being in the photograph in the first place. I'd take these mysterious people and make histories for them. I made them into "pivotal" people. I'd make a nobody into the bloke who was making "readymades" two years before Marcel Duchamp (who, in my version of events, would rip off the idea and take all the credit for it).

One reason I was working in this way, was to articulate a growing anxiety about what I saw as the smug consensus of "official" art history; its presumptuous reorganising of the past into the "important" and the "not important". It could also have been that I was reacting to what I saw as art school explaining everything away and robbing me of all the fun in trying to decipher art's enigmas.

Apart from an obvious involvement in role-play and concern with identity, the fragmentary nature of this work was particularly appealing to me. It meant that I never had to make anything completely. A couple of drawings in a certain style, some paragraphs from a story and a faked clipping from a journal were all that was needed to suggest the rest. It was a combination of my inherent



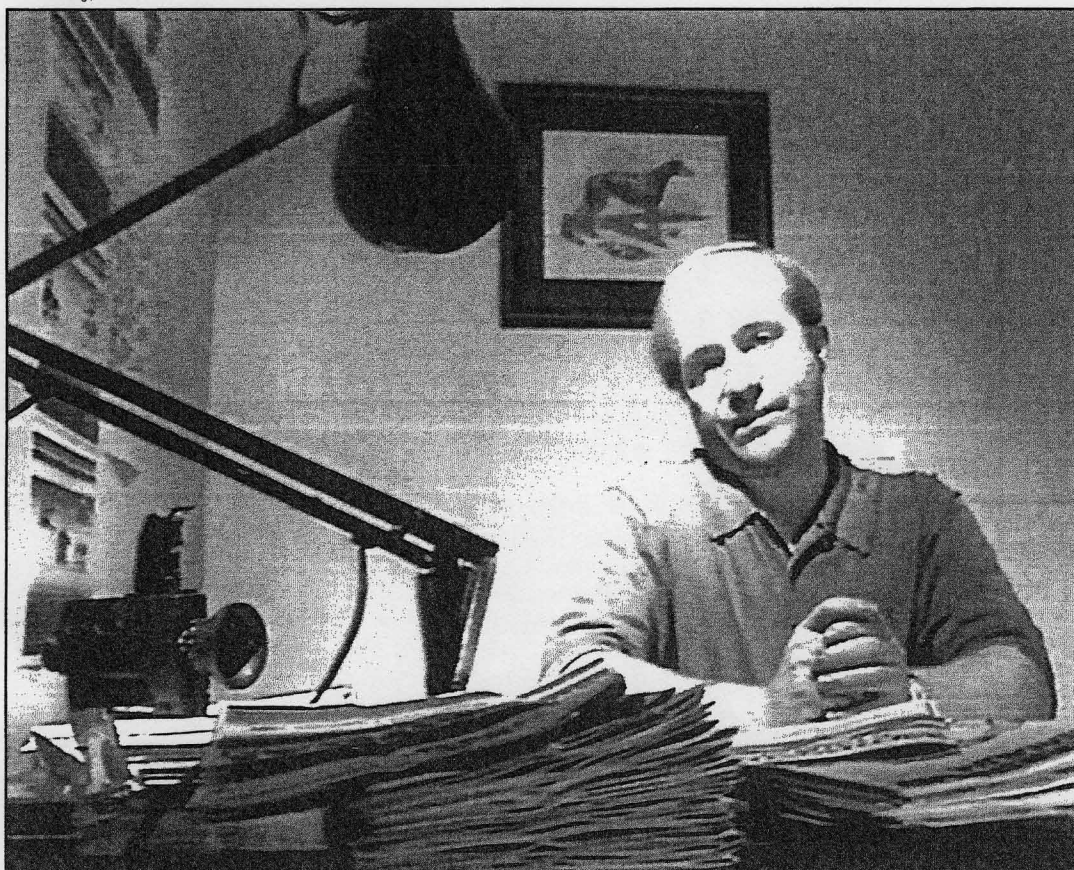
*Lenny's Documentary*, 1978

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laziness and the pleasure of using the kind of brevity that cinema uses to suggest a larger spatial and temporal landscape.

At art school my work, for the most part, was addressed to the world of art school. It enjoyed the situation at the same time as taking the piss out of it. I became increasingly aware, as my course was nearing its end, that in order

*Sick as a Dog*, 1989





*Monolog*, 1998

to continue working in this way, I would have to remain in this world, by going into teaching or finding some further course of research within an institution. I didn't much fancy this. I'd become very tired of the RCA atmosphere. Being a Londoner attending a London college had allowed me to live in two different social spheres. By day I felt I was becoming suffocated by the dry air of aesthetics, but by night, I was having fun with a different crowd consisting of old school mates, people in rock bands, layabouts, drunks and minicab drivers.

When I made *Lenny's Documentary* in 1978, it was a reconciliation of the two sides of a split personality that I had become.

I did not regard *Lenny* as a film narrative. To me it was still a piece of "evidence" art. But instead of making an artwork by an imaginary artist, I made myself into a "nobody" who was imagining an artwork. I became *Lenny*: a person sitting alone, sifting through notes and reading aloud sections of a proposed documentary about his life and environment. I locked myself in a room, sat in front of a fixed, operator-less, camera and talked to it. It came out as a 45 minute monologue, edited together from fragments recorded over a much longer period.

When I was writing the text of *Lenny's Documentary*, as is still often the case, I was talking aloud to my myself or to an imagined listener. I happened to notice myself in a mirror and had this fantasy of it being a two-way mirror, with an audience situated in the room next door. With this conceit in mind, I sensed how powerful the piece could be. Through the instantaneous self-surveillance that the medium allows, I recognised video's

essential quality of being raw and direct.

When I called the camera a "fucking cunt", I was calling whoever watched the tape a "fucking cunt". It released a pent up anger that had been building up in me for a long time. In a way, it was directed at the intellectual constipation I felt the RCA had come to represent for me.

*Lenny's Documentary*, was an "invisible" documentary, a reaction to the "visible evidence" of conventional documentaries. The tour of *Lenny's* local environment was, in fact, a tour of *Lenny's* head and the mental landscape of anyone who feels trapped and alienated. *Lenny* himself was a mixture of all the friends I hung about with and people I met on the streets of Leytonstone. But he was also a possible version of myself, expressing things I'd never been able to before. The objectivity it allowed me meant I could mix humour and seriousness in what was an incredibly bleak vision of the world.

"... And I wonder what they see in me? I wonder what they see in my face? I try and change my face, but I can't help looking like that... 'Oi, do you like your face mate? Do you like it? Cos it's fucking killing me!'"

*Lenny's Documentary*, 1978

Nowadays *Lenny's Documentary* could be categorised as a video-diary, but there was no such genre at the time of its making. People often thought it was performance art. A review in *Art Forum* compared it to Beckett and many people would ask if I had ever considered adapting it for the stage. They couldn't see that it HAD to be a recording, had to run its course mechanically, on tape. I wanted to take audiences

where they didn't particularly want to go and make them unsure as to whether they were witnessing a work of fiction or a real testimony.

After *Lenny's Documentary*, which was selected for the Hayward Annual of 1979, I produced *From the Junkyard and B.29*, both using the monologue format and mixing autobiographical themes with fictional characterisation.

The work since these early tapes has involved a more "active" fictionalising of my screen persona. *Sick As A Dog* (1989), was constructed from an actual diary I had written the year previously, when I had spent my time hanging around London's greyhound stadiums, living "the dog life". For this tape, I introduced the diary format into what purported to be an instructional video on "how to win at greyhound racing". Because it was commissioned by the Arts Council and Channel Four and therefore scheduled for a late-night screening on TV, I made the video so that most of the scenes took place in the author's bedroom, supposedly after night's gambling and drinking. I visualised my audience for the work as being in a similar state.

More recently in *Monolog* (1998), a completely subjective tape made by walking and talking with a hand held camera, I returned to the streets of Leytonstone to create the character of Grant Lawrence, an overseas sales representative going through a crises of identity. This characterisation, in which the protagonist is not actually seen but portrayed by a vision of the world through his eyes, is made credible by the now common availability of portable video technology. The walk with a handcam is used to create a metaphor of "life's journey" and to meditate on the idea of "self-representation".

A central theme of *Monolog* and of my work as a whole, is the question of whether we are acting on our own behalf or whether we are performing to someone else's script.

**Ian Bourn, January 2000**

A screening of *The End of the World* (1982) and *Monolog* (1998) will take place at the Tate Gallery on February 13th at 3.45pm.