

Marty St James



Marty St James has never been interested in art objects. 'I believe that art is primarily something that takes place between people and the wonderful thing is being able to touch the soul of someone who lived 400 years ago.'

Marty originally intended becoming a painter. But in art school, contact with performance artists changed his thinking. 'I became interested in the transitive nature of performance art, like life itself – the fleeting moment,' he explains.

His ideas on art were not always appreciated. As part of his final degree show in the mid-1970s, Marty appeared as a fictitious character on the TV game show **Mr and Mrs**. For the examiner, a mid-70s abstract painter, this wasn't art. Luckily Marty's tutors were very supportive of what he was trying to do.

Through the '80s Marty performed all over the world in all kinds of venues – from the street, to galleries, theatres, even on the Isle of Wight ferry. During the Thatcher years, a good time for those selling art, Marty continued to develop art which wasn't consumable. His move to video was not a change of heart regarding art objects, but rather a desire to record performance. Of course there were other advantages to video: 'I could edit out parts I would rather not experience – the parts I didn't particularly want to see,' he explains. 'But it is still to do with people and what they are and what they look like and how they define themselves. That is still there.'

His growing reputation brought him opportunities to produce material for television. He made pieces for both BBC and Channel 4. One major piece, **Time Code**, was broadcast in seven countries. But he soon wanted to move on.

'I became fed up with television, fed up with the idea of television,' he says. Television was dominated by a journalistic paradigm, it was a world of talk and words, not visual imagination. 'I found elements of television very restrictive,' he says, 'and when I look at it I still find it very restrictive.'

While working for television, Marty was also undertaking other major works. **Hotel** converted the Air Gallery into a virtual Hotel with a mixture of video and installation. And he travelled round the country with **Civic Monument**, a living monument involving 26 people.

During the early '90s, Marty started to produce video portraits with fellow artist Anne Wilson which won him more national and international attention. He also developed video portraits on his own. **The Swimmer**, an 11-monitor video portrait of Duncan Goodhew by Marty and Anne Wilson is in the permanent collection at the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Working as a fine artist teaching in Graphic Design (Moving Image) at Camberwell has, he believes, helped his development as an artist. He doesn't talk much about his work to the students. 'I don't want to produce a load of little Martys. It is the point of discovery that is very important rather than a philosophy.' Teaching makes him disciplined about how he uses his time and it forces him to clarify his own thinking. 'Having to formulate the correct terminology – the correct way of expressing yourself – from an intellectual point of view that helps my work and my own position.'

Now Marty is preparing to travel to Japan for a major exhibition. Thirteen artists from around the world have been invited to exhibit in a show entitled **Electronically Yours** at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography which will run for three months. All the invited artists are working with video or digital media. Marty will be one of three artists representing Britain. Others come from continental Europe, America and Japan itself. 'From an artistic point of view it's a great honour to be invited,' says Marty.

As for the future, Marty has plans to develop his work using new media. He is particularly excited by some of the possibilities offered by interactivity. 'It's like performance,' he says. 'There is always that element where the performer is affected by the reaction of the spectators.' Marty hopes interactivity will allow him develop that interaction with an audience in his electronic work. It would be, as he puts it, 'a completion of the circle'.

Attitudes to electronic media have changed dramatically in the art world since the 1970s. Surely the final proof of Marty's 'success' is the National Film Institute's decision to conserve for the nation a copy of each of Marty's creations over the last 20 years – including that appearance on **Mr and Mrs**.