

# CHISENALE INTERVIEWS: JORDAN WOLFSON

**Jordan Wolfson**

*Raspberry Poser*

29 November 2013 – 2 February 2014

**Katie Guggenheim:** *I'd like to start by asking you about how you've chosen to install Raspberry Poser at Chisenhale Gallery – the light trap, the proximity of the screen, the white carpet?*

**Jordan Wolfson:** When I install a video it's always intuitive. Every time I do it I try and tune it to the viewer's body. I use myself as the initial viewer, and usually I collaborate with the curator and the staff of the institution in gauging the physical experience of the video, but I mainly rely on my own physical experience to gauge the installation.

The white carpet reflects the light in the video in a profound way. It will constantly change the colour of the space and reflect back into the space. When the video goes black ideally the space also becomes very dark and when it goes white the space brightens. When it goes red the space becomes red.

**KG:** *So the video bleeds into the space?*

**JW:** It's a very physical experience and that's what I'm mainly concerned with – the physical experience of the viewer.

**KG:** *You've combined many different types of images and animations. What is your working method? You already mentioned that you work intuitively. How do you work with all this material and make these associations?*

**JW:** I try to be as open as I can to different types of content. I open myself up and I really just follow what I think is interesting and what I feel is – it's not even about relevancy - what I'm internally moved by. A lot of my videos I saw in my head quite clearly before I made them. With *Animation, masks* (2011) – the first time I heard the Richard Brautigan 'Love Poem' I immediately saw the Shylock character that I used in the video, speaking the words. The strongest case so far has

been with *Raspberry Poser*. What you see in the video is really how things looked inside my mind when I was making the work. I really saw it just like this. It's a very close approximation of my imagination being relayed into the media.

**KG:** *I feel like most of Raspberry Poser could be described as a point of view shot, with some dream sequences mixed in.*

**JW:** Yes, it is very POV. I would drive or walk around New York and I would look up and see the sky and I would see the condom or I'd look across the street and I'd see the bouncing HIV virus. It is exactly POV, you're really right on.

**KG:** *So those animations came from your imagination? I had the impression that they were 'found' animations', like the found images.*

**JW:** They were found but after I found them I imagined them and I couldn't stop imagining them. I'd drive around and I'd listen to all the songs that I used in the soundtrack and I really just saw it just like that.

**KG:** *How do you work with animators? What's the process – is it collaborative?*

**JW:** I try to find people who have their own autonomous talent. I try to harness their autonomous talent so they take the work further and open it up... to free them to work in a way that I would not have worked myself... for them to show me things that I wouldn't have done myself... to take the work to a higher level and to a further place.

**KG:** *Do you work the same way with the animators of the hand-drawn elements, like the 'angry kid' character, as you do with the animators working on the computer-generated animation – the elements like the condom and the HIV viruses?*

**JW:** Yes I work the same way with all of them.

**KG:** *But you edit the material together yourself?*

**JW:** It's basically like I'm building up components. They deliver me all these components and I edit it all together. It's like sitting in a restaurant

and your ordering and the meal's not complete – 'oh, I need a little extra piece of this, a piece of this...'

**KG:** *There's something really interesting about the images in the background – sometimes they're still, sometimes they're moving – and their relationship to the animated elements in the foreground. This constant movement seems to shift and destabilise the meaning of the work.*

**JW:** It's a kind of formal rhythm that tunes into the viewer's brain and opens them up to experience the artwork.

**KG:** *I'm not from New York and so the images of SoHo appeal to me in a particular way – they're both familiar and foreign. Or the images of children's bedrooms from the 1980s: because I was a child in the 80s they feel very nostalgic to me. I guess that's the era in which you grew up as well? How conscious are you of the effect these images have on other people or are you finding images that resonate with you personally?*

**JW:** I guess they have a very basic resonance with me. I'm from New York and so the view of New York has been very prevalent to me.

**KG:** *Where did you grow up?*

**JW:** I grew up on the Upper West Side not downtown but I would come downtown to visit my aunt and uncle who lived in Tribeca. But also just walking around SoHo even now in my adult life... In Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* when he talks about the Paris arcades and the surreal dream state of all these things to buy and all these fabricated, themed environments – I see SoHo very much like that. There's a certain socio economic aspect but that's not what I find really interesting. It's more about a kind of fabricated human touch and the contrast and displacement of the roughness of the buildings in relation to the softness and the contrivedness of the interiors and the stores.

**KG:** *Is that to do with the shift – the gentrification that is such a big part of the recent history of SoHo? So many subcultures, including gay cultures and also the history of artists working in that area, have been cleansed to make way for high-end boutiques. Is there a parallel to be*

*found between the sanitisation of the city and the sanitisation of culture more broadly?*

**JW:** I'm sure all this stuff's in there but I believe that my role as an artist is as a conduit. I can't take responsibility and I'm not going to be able to intellectualise the whole thing. I don't have a political position on all this. I try and open myself as a conduit to look at reality and re-process reality and see the world. This is my version of seeing the world. This has gone through a kind of filter of myself and I don't believe I'm unique in the way I see the world. I think we all share our views together and they shift and change based on where you're from and who you are and I think that's an amazing part of being human and participating in a pack mentality. It goes to questions of zeitgeist and things like that – we're all moving together like a flock of birds.

**KG:** *How does Paris fit into this? The Parisian parks you've depicted are very controlled types of public space where a lot of different kind of behaviour is prohibited. You can't even walk on the grass, for example. Then on the other hand you have SoHo, which has a tradition of rules being broken and boundaries being pushed. Now, on the back of that, has it become equally bourgeois?*

**JW:** I'm not so interested in the bourgeois. I was interested in the manipulation that happens of human beings into the natural world and an example of that would be these parks – the manipulation of nature. SoHo is something else altogether different. I don't think that they balance each other out.

**KG:** *Raspberry Poser has been described as part of a trilogy of works with Con Leche and Animation, masks. How does it relate to those previous works and what's new here?*

**JW:** It was never me who said these works were part of a trilogy. I was simply following a line of making my art and developing something within animation. There's going to be another animation coming out soon as well so I don't know what you're going to call it then.

When I was making *Con Leche* I made a conscious decision to begin the process of setting myself free of artistic judgment and of adding value in the work. What I mean by value is that a lot of artists feel that

there have to be already established formal codes within their art for it to be accepted. They don't feel comfortable with something that doesn't immediately appear familiar to them. Often the intellectual sensation of something appearing familiar is the same as that of something being formally successful. For me, that's problematic. So I made a conscious decision to let go of that. It actually began with a work called *Untitled False Document* (2008). This was in a way the last piece I made that was part of the way of thinking I experienced – the feeling of being trapped within art making.

In the work there's a monologue about the entrapment of content and it was very necessary for me to recognise that. I had to give up a lot. So *Con Leche* was the first work when I began giving that up... giving up logic or attachment to value or recognisable form. After *Con Leche* was *Animation, masks* and that was also a process of letting go and about accepting imagery, and then *Raspberry Poser* continued this. In each piece I've let go more and more. I can't say that I've fully let go yet but I feel that I've become a better artist in making these works. I've let go of certain value systems that were inherent to art making in order to make work that was of my own voice specifically. You let go of Bruce Nauman, it's very important. You have to let go of your heroes to make your own work and find your own voice. If you talk to any artist, musician, writer or filmmaker they'll say the same thing.

Also, through each of these works I've had more contact with myself and I've gotten to know myself better. I know that's not necessarily important for the viewer but I'm also a viewer through the experience of making the work. The work is autonomous even to myself. I exist outside the work and so I have an experience viewing the work while making it.

**KG:** *It's interesting that you feel that your own presence in the work has increased because you do literally feature in the work more and more. Your voice directs the monologue in Con Leche and also features in Animation, masks. In Raspberry Poser you appear on camera as a punk. Why did you want to be the punk?*

**JW:** I wanted to be the punk because if I hadn't been the punk it wouldn't have been the same kind of artwork. Had I been directing the punk it would become completely different conceptually. By me

being the punk I'm the complete author of the artwork. It completes me as an author of the artwork. If I'm not the punk it makes me simply a director, an editor and a voice actor. I'm interested in a total presence within the artwork. I'm not interested in being a film director at all. I'm more of a sculptor than a director. You have to think of it as sculpture not so much as direction. Even though a filmmaker is an artist my role is that of a complete artist. I'm a complete artist.

**KG:** *What does that mean?*

**JW:** I mean that the work is a complete saturation of myself. I exist in the work 100%. I'm embedded into the artwork. What if Chris Burden didn't do his performances himself and had a performer do his performances? It would have been completely different.

**KG:** *But that's a very different kind of performance.*

**JW:** No it's exactly the same thing. It just has different content and form.

**KG:** *There are several characters in Raspberry Poser: the CGI condom and gang of raspberry-like HIV viruses, the hand-drawn animation of the angry kid and the punk. I guess the punk is the poser?*

**JW:** The punk is inherently a poser but the HIV virus is also a poser. The whole work is a poser and a poser is a distortion because you're taking something that is and making it something that it isn't. By doing that you see it clearly for what it truly is without subjectification.

**KG:** *I think the weirdest moment in the film is when the punk stares straight into the camera. It's aggressive but it also makes him seem quite vulnerable. I'd like to know what you think about that?*

**JW:** That's also an act of distortion. He looks into the camera and validates the viewer. He makes direct contact with the viewer and changes the viewing frequency of the artwork.

**KG:** *What do you mean by viewing frequency?*

**JW:** The viewing frequency of the work shifts when he looks into

the camera. You stop looking at him objectively and it becomes a subjective relationship.

**KG:** *The viewer's ability to objectify is destroyed when the direct gaze is returned. You've used this device several times. The cartoon kid looks straight at you as he's cutting himself open.*

**JW:** The cartoon kid is always looking into the camera.

**KG:** *Like the Shylock character in Animation, masks, who doesn't take his eyes off you.*

**JW:** Always looking into the camera.

**KG:** *And like the series of lobster claws covered with pornographic images (Untitled, 2012).*

**JW:** Always looking into the camera.

**KG:** *Are there any I've missed?*

**JW:** The work I'm producing now is even more the essence of that. Also the performance for The Cartier Award at Frieze Art Fair – *Your Napoleon* (2009) – was completely based on that... these two young actors in the park staring at you... that was how it started. I felt that through the direct gaze you create a kind of formal bridge between the artwork and the viewer and almost any type of content can pass over that. A formal bridge is created linking the artwork and the viewer. The viewer stops inspecting the content and instead simply experiences the form and the content.

**KG:** *So it's a direct connection between the viewer and the work.*

**JW:** Yes, exactly.

**KG:** *It has a very unnerving effect, I think. Especially in the case of the character in Animation, masks. Because he is such a horrible character you don't expect him to look at you so earnestly. If he looked the other way you could look at him and deal with him but you can't. But then with the porn claws that's maybe a different thing, when the porn actors*

*in the images are looking straight at you. Is there a difference for you?*

**JW:** I think it's different because their anuses are always visible and the anus becomes the third eye. I thought that was interesting formally. They become vulnerable and passive through the physical position they're in.

**KG:** *If Animation, masks is about love, or at least the content deals with love as a theme, then Raspberry Poser feels like it's more about desire, as separate from love – desire in relation to aspiration and product. Is the work about desire and how it operates today, especially in our online lives?*

**JW:** I never thought of that but I'm sure it could be in there.

**KG:** *I'm thinking about the images you've used, for example, the ones of DIY projects. People post these kind of images online, validating their sense of ownership and simultaneously generating desire in others. And there are aspirational interiors for sale in the stores in SoHo that you are showing us. Are these spaces where desire is generated?*

**JW:** I guess one could say that it's about a desire to consume things and the desire to identify yourself with the things that you buy. It's a very postmodern sensibility. It's about capitalist freedom – the freedom to invent yourself.

**KG:** *I think there's something more going on here... about the way we use the internet... the way we look at images and the way our desires, even subconscious desires, affect the way we navigate the internet and the images we see.*

**JW:** *Maybe there's a kind of collective consciousness element in that. But for me, I search out images that I find formally moving. I put it all together intuitively and there are certain things I'm drawn to.*

**KG:** *So what about those suburban construction projects? What is it about those images that appeals to you?*



**JW:** When I was a kid at one time my parents wanted to buy a house and I remember them taking me around. I remember walking through half constructed houses and I always found them very beautiful. They always had a particular smell.

**KG:** *The attraction is supposed to be about being able to project your own desires on the incomplete buildings, right?*

**JW:** For me it wasn't about that. The unfinished houses related to the unfinished artworks of Robert Ryman... when something is so much better in its incomplete form – more beautiful and pure. The more something becomes complete the more alienating it becomes.

**KG:** *What about the images of minimal, slightly gross designer interiors. They're minimal to some extent but aren't they also alienating?*

**JW:** I think those places are also beautiful.

**KG:** *It's interesting that you went for home products rather than fashion, for example. A lot of the images in Raspberry Poser are about creating spaces for your self. They make me think about ideas of protection and vulnerability – one of the dialectics that seems to play out in the work as a whole.*

**JW:** It was also about dreamscapes and inventing oneself, inventing one's life. Curating one's life through the objects in one's home. People creating an identity through what they collect and buy.

**KG:** *And through the physical spaces that they create and inhabit.*

**JW:** But it really goes back to the idea of the arcades in Walter Benjamin.

**KG:** *And what about the condom and HIV viruses that are bouncing all over these interiors?*

**JW:** I don't know what to say other than I intuitively found this very interesting. There's something interesting about sexualising a space and also polluting spaces, but I was thinking about how to

anthropomorphise these things. I'm like an architect and the viewer is the one who inhabits the space and who sees it. I just set it up for you. I don't have any grand schemes or plots.

*KG: But it seems like there's so much of you here. You almost make yourself vulnerable by putting so much of yourself into your work.*

**JW:** What's wrong with being vulnerable?

*KG: Nothing. It's just very interesting. It's interesting that you choose to make yourself vulnerable like that.*

**JW:** I'm just open and I'm trying to find an original way to describe reality that's true to how I see it. This artwork and other artworks are the result of that. It's as simple as that. That's the clearest answer I'm going to give you.

*KG: You've used a series of pop songs to soundtrack the video and I think there's something interesting in your choice about authenticity or inauthenticity. A pop ballad might possibly be the most inauthentic thing ever.*

**JW:** I never saw it like that. I'm not cynical or ironic in making these works.

*KG: What's your relationship to the music?*

**JW:** I think that the songs all have a certain power and frequency that I was attracted to.

*KG: What kind of power?*

**JW:** I think they all have a kind of love power that was embedded in them.

*KG: What is love power?*

**JW:** The feeling of love, the frequency of love, was embedded into those songs very precisely. I believe that the frequency and the intention from which you do something become embedded into that thing that

you do it to.

I firmly believe that one can translate physical energy – you can call it your chi energy – into something and then it exists within that infinitely, making it a high frequency object. All of those songs, to me, held high frequencies of positive energy.

When I'm making the artwork I do a lot of meditation and I try to bring my energy up and instill my high frequency into the artwork. If you were to compare *Animation, masks* to *Raspberry Poser* you would see that *Raspberry Poser* holds a much higher positive frequency than *Animation, masks* does. *Animation, masks* also holds sexual energy and also negative energy. It has a negative frequency in relation to a high sexual frequency, which creates an interesting tension. *Raspberry Poser* holds a high frequency in different variations, but remains generally high.

**KG:** *Could you say more about the variations in Raspberry Poser?*

**JW:** Each song has a different variation. It also fluctuates into negative energy because of the cartoon kid but it more or less holds a high frequency. I'm not the first person to do this. Most people who have naturally high frequencies translate these things into art works. If you look at Helen Marten's work, for example, you will see a constant high positive frequency in all her artworks.

**KG:** *Do you use these frequencies in your work – do you manipulate them?*

**JW:** I feel that manipulating is a negative word.

**KG:** *Manipulating as you would manipulate materials, like clay.*

**JW:** Yeah, I think through the editing process you create a kind of drama of frequency. Cutting, drop out. Similar to Michael Clark where the sound goes off and you hear the pit-patter.

**KG:** *You can hear the dancers' feet moving on the floor.*

**JW:** Same thing. Does something to your brain.

**KG:** *What kind of sexuality are you depicting?*

**JW:** I don't think I'm depicting any sexuality actually.

**KG:** *Is it your sexuality?*

**JW:** No, I mean it's more about relaying reality and looking at the world and I'm doing my best to authentically reinterpret the word and reprocess it and then deliver it back in a kind of sculpted artwork, in a kind of form.

**KG:** *So what about HIV?*

**JW:** HIV is relevant to me and to you and your neighbour. It's relevant to everyone.

**KG:** *I'm almost certain that I'm more likely to die of cancer than AIDS but AIDS still seems more threatening to me. Perhaps because of growing up in a post-AIDS crisis era. It's bound up in culture more than other life threatening illnesses.*

**JW:** Isn't that interesting? And a very good reason to include it in an artwork?

**KG:** *It is.*

**JW:** Well there's your answer. Let's go to the next one.

**KG:** *Can we not talk about the HIV viruses a bit more?*

**JW:** But we just answered it. We've got an answer.

**KG:** *Ok then, what about Merce Cunningham? The animation of the viruses is based on choreography by Merce Cunningham?*

**JW:** I thought that Merce Cunningham had an amazing way of reinterpreting nature – the indifference of nature into movement. I have a very deep and long-standing interest in the indifference of nature and I was moved by the way he would interpret that into his choreography.

When we were animating the HIV virus I looked at a lot of Merce Cunningham videos and I worked with the animator and I explained to him this indifferent movement.

*KG: Indifferent movement?*

**JW:** How Merce Cunningham's dancers moved with indifference. That's why his choreography is so beautiful. The movement of indifference is so fascinating to us humans. You step out on a cliff and you look at the ocean and it looks to perfect and beautiful and you wouldn't change a thing. It's absolute in that you would never conceive of changing it. How could it be better? Or you look at an autumn leaf. You never critique an autumn leaf because its nature.

*KG: So to give that movement to HIV viruses...*

**JW:** Well that's interesting isn't it, because the HIV virus is indifferent. It's just a little mechanical virus. The DNA inside the HIV virus tells it to do certain things and it does them. It's mechanical. That's indifferent and that's very beautiful. So here's something that's considered negative but it's actually indifferent. It's only negative to us because it has the potential to harm us. The great dichotomy of being human and being conscious is that we are not indifferent and the bodies we inhabit are so indifferent and they punish us constantly, like storms, earthquakes, cancer, it's mechanical. The universe is a mechanical place. There will always be that problem, that dichotomy because we struggle and search for reason in our lives. It will be an endless point of fascination. That's why I think indifference is so beautiful, because it's the mechanical way of the universe.

*KG: But isn't there also something mechanical about human desire that's parallel to the way a virus works? Genes want to reproduce and so desire is also a lot about that.*

**JW:** We're also mechanical. And what Christianity has done is told you to suppress your desire. Isn't that interesting? To suppress your mechanical nature – your desire to be as the universe is.

*Jordan Wolfson interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, November 2013. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*