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The Camera as a Group Imaginary

I was born in a Hertfordshire and my early memories are being under one of those reinforced tables while the doodlebugs came down. So that's where I started life, and lived there for my first six years, and then we moved to Sussex.

When we moved to Brighton that was fantastic because we went swimming every morning before school - and I enjoyed I think I enjoyed art and English at school as far as I can remember. I wasn't particularly bright at anything - but that's what I liked doing. And I was the only non-Catholic in a Catholic convent for six years and I stupidly thought I could convert everybody not to be Catholic. So I spent a lot of time arguing in doctrine lessons about Catholic doctrine.

Starting out as a journalist then an architect's assistant in the late 1960s

Well I didn't go straight to university because I didn't have the money to go to university, and I had to really wait until I was a mature student to be able to get a mature student's grant. So I worked to begin with and I worked as a - I wanted to be a journalist.

So I eventually got a job on something called Clay Craft which is about the clay industry! And, I worked on that for a while, and then I worked for Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry the architects and that was really where I got into thinking I definitely wanted to do sculpture - and I got to Leicester School of Art and did my pre-dip there, and then I went to Goldsmiths eventually.

An eye-opening summer of Pop Art in New York 1967

In '67 I'd been to New York for my summer vacation and worked its Skidmore, Owings and Merrell, another Architects firm, and met everybody you've probably ever heard of in the Pop Art and, just by, by luck I had one introduction to one person who was an artist and... he introduced me to everybody else, and so I had a great time sort of actually you know meeting Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol and all those kinds of people in between work at this very busy architectural firm on Park Avenue. And it was an eye opener that people in different genres were working together so that somebody, you know, musicians were working with painters and that's something that hadn't really happened in my experience in England at that stage. So...I came back from that full of energy and realising that, you know you could speak out, you could do things, you could change things.

Art school in 1968

I was at art school in '68 which was of course a time when there wasn't any teaching... The arts staff were on strike, the art students were pretty fed up because they weren't being taught... And with a group of friends from art school we started something called Pavilions in the Parks which was a whole set of domes in parks, in public places.

Pavilions in the Parks

So we advertised random art...random artists for random audiences. The idea was that people would come across something in the park and they didn't know it was art, but could decide whether it was art or not. And so we had all these people applying and we had a tombola, literally, that we took out tickets for a pavilion for a week or two weeks, whichever they wanted. And they could have back projection for dance inside a dome, or they could have cardboard domes which were designed by somebody called Keith Critchlow after Buckminster Fuller...which were geodesic domes that you hang pictures in – and we ran it for three months.

We had three thousand pound debt at the beginning I think which was huge in 1968. As you can imagine. And so we had to wait for people to come into the pavilions to look around, and sometimes somebody rich gave us a cheque which was very nice.

We persuaded architects to design us these inflatable domes and Geodesic domes and we got...lots and lots of support from all sorts of people, and we had...a dome which was a sort of Information Dome, where we sold waffles and ice cream because we actually didn't have any money at all to live on, and we lived on waffles and ice cream for three months really.

It was a 'I can do' kind of situation for all of us I think. And I think also breaking the rules with the Arts Council, you know persuading Gulbenkian, Wates Foundation, everybody to kind of come on board with something that was so fanciful in lots of ways and, you know, un-prestigious for them, possibly. But you must remember that the Arts Lab was also going on at same time - there was there was a lot of movement, it wasn't the only one, but I think they kind of spontaneously burst open in 1968 really, or came into flower.

There was lot of engagement with all kinds of different things going on. And so that's really where I started...changing the way I worked, very much more public than before.

From site-specific sculpture to Community Art

I was making objects which had to be constructed on site... One that I showed at the first Pavilions in the Parks, was a bridge that was made with flags. It was a form that had flags, so that...that echoed the... parts of the bridge. So that a part would move with the wind, if you like... Later on I did more installation stuff - I did a big installation at the Serpentine Gallery for example and things like that.

Art on the Aylesbury Estate

I was going over the fly-over one day on the Old Kent Road and I realised that he could see the river from the top, but of course you can't see it from below. And I was talking to kids around that area and saying did you know the river was down the road, and none of them did.

Then...a competition was, was announced by the Arts Council for Art into Landscape and I decided to put in a proposal to turn the Old Kent Road, that flyover, into a rollerskating ramp on Sundays. And so we, you know, we got it through 33 committees of the GLC in fact, and one day the local police said we could do it, just for a trial. So we actually had a trial going down it. And of course by this time I started to talk to all the local youth workers, tenants association and people like that on the Heygate and on the Aylesbury, and on the Aylesbury the youth worker who worked there said "Do you realise there are three youth workers here who are going to have to look after 4000 children this summer." And so I said "No of course I didn't realise that. But why don't we train the parents and set up some workshops." And so that's really how WACAT started.

WACAT: The Walworth and Aylesbury Community Arts Trust

Yes, so Walworth and Aylesbury Community Arts Trust started with I think just three of us. Tony and Leslie and I. Tony was really involved in video. I was just a sort of general artist, and Leslie was particularly involved with youth, and was a youth worker in fact.

None of us actually had any money to begin with, we literally were doing it, I think voluntarily... you know various kinds of activities that drama and things that we could get parents to be involved in with their kids. And that's how it started, in a very haphazard sort of way.

I would have thought it probably it took us two and a half years before we actually got any funding for salaries in, and could expand the working group. And gradually, by the time we got the trust set up with the Tenants Associations, the chair from Stepney council... In the end there were about nine people. After about five years... We became the employees of the trust. We were never the trust ourselves.

The design of the Aylesbury Estate and its impact on the community

We walked around the estate and discovered that...there were walkways in the air that meant that basically people had people walking over their bedrooms all or most of the night... So there was no common ground by a doorstep, which I thought was a major reason why people weren't meeting each other. And as we were walking along these walkways, we discovered that there was actually a planning fault every so many hundred feet where there were little flats that weren't used by anybody that were actually heated and painted up and were empty. And so we decided that we could run, perhaps workshops from these little flats if we could persuade the council to let us have them, which is what we did.

Introducing video workshops on the Aylesbury Estate

I'd met Tony - and he'd got a video camera which I had never seen before, which I thought was very exciting because I thought I could learn video if I got him to teach other people video. That was quite a nice thing... He was very casual about it, you know the handing it over, and I think he taught us sort of how to focus and things like that...I think he taught me how to edit at some point.

I was a visual artist and I thought it was a really interesting way of working with people. And I could see the immediate attraction and immediate return attraction for children and young people, that, you know, they could have a result in a night of something that they'd made, and that was incredibly important on an estate like that where there was a lot of diversity, there was a lot of problems with kids, or for kids, being there, and very little for them to do. And so we could actually run these workshops where sometimes things were achieved in one evening. Other times they took longer that were more elaborate. But basically it was a way of involving people very, very importantly letting them see themselves... Understanding that you've got your own imagination is a very important stage in development.

Video workshops on the Aylesbury: The camera as a group imaginary.

We had to run these workshops mostly in the term time at night, in the winter you know. And it was quite scary going on there actually because these walkways were scary, and also because you've got mobs of kids trying to break in to the mob that were already inside, because they all wanted something to do.

I worked for quite a long time with particularly groups of girls and Tony worked with groups of boys, because some of the things that they were talking about it [it] was quite important they were separate. And I can remember them re-

inventing within the room, you know their father in prison behind the bars of a chair. And it was all at that sort of level. The idea that within this room, within this huge place, you were actually making another space that was quite real to them, and that they could imagine within that space a whole lot of different scenarios, some of which were true and some which were complete fantasy...but they often liked to mix that too. So the idea of the camera as a group imaginary was what it was really about I think, and was very interesting and exciting. And one was inventing all the time...how to do it, because you had very few resources and it wasn't like you could go out and wander around at night, you know you couldn't do that. I mean obviously there were some things we did at weekends or at different times but as a regular do, it was, you know these night workshops with these kids.

Bringing isolated individuals and groups together - Alliance Building as Community Arts practice.

We realised that they were not only the tenants - and the tenants were themselves divided in that there were different Tenants Associations for different blocks and they didn't necessarily have any link between them...We also realised that there were lot of other workers on the estate who, you know, were like us pretty isolated.

There were home school liaison officers who'd been put in because of this huge increase in the population...there were police who also were patrolling. There was health workers, there were, you know, dozens of different people who were all working in isolation. So I think one of the quite important things that we did quite early on was to call a meeting monthly of all these different workers at different levels, and the Tenants Association organisers, so that we could actually co-ordinate a bit what everybody was thinking, what everybody was trying to do.

Looking back - although I didn't think of it then - I think that's sort of been a constant in my way of working with what's called community - whatever it's called, video, or art, or whatever - is this whole idea that you need to build alliances up and down the system, that if you don't have alliances you don't get anywhere really.

How to define Community Video

I know, I hate the Community Video but it was Community Video yes... I think it means all things to nobody. You know it's just one of those terms that is so loose and people had such different ideas about what they were doing like Community Arts. I used all those terms in my time but I think actually we had quite different

trajectories within it, in what we were intending to do and what we were trying to achieve.

I wanted to work with communities closely, I wanted to look at this whole thing about alliance building and representation...In a sense I suppose influenced by people I was reading at the time, like Paulo Freire talking about you know how people represent themselves through their words. We were all brought up at that period on Cultural Studies and on, you know those kinds of, the idea of analysing codes of speech.

I think that was one of the key things that really interested me was the whole idea of...the subject becoming the object, and the object becoming the subject. And how that worked with video in the way we were working, I mean that you know people weren't just plonked in front of the camera but were representing themselves through the camera and humanising themselves in a way through their representation to another group.

Documenting a community in flux *Michael Faraday School, 1977*

We made films with kids, but also showing people their own lives and exploring with people their own history and...with the Michael Faraday a film about the school that was being knocked down and that was being rebuilt as a new school and where most kids on the estate had their infancy and primary experience. It was very important in a way that they knew that their grandparents had been there because one of the interesting things about the Aylesbury Estate that we learned through a Workers Education class documentation, was that in 1927 that whole area had been lived in by Dockers.

And so people looking at their own history and realising that there had been a history, and that you know some of the older people actually remembered going to the Michael Faraday school, and could talk about it, and had seen it change and were seeing it change yet again, was all sort of an important part of people's historic continuity and sense of continuity.

I mean at that stage we were all so new to video, and I can't remember, you know, I think we just handed people the microphone and they handed it around, and obviously the kids did a lot of the interviewing as well. But whether they were behind the camera or not I just can't remember at all.

I can remember it going on for ages. For the fact that you know we were waiting for the film for bits to be knocked down and other bits to be built. I can see by watching it that various key characters like the school secretary, the Home School Liaison officer, the Headmaster, were obviously very involved because they're completely sort of opened up to the whole thing.

WACAT finally acquire their own video equipment...

I was writing a book for the Gulbenkian at the same time as doing the Aylesbury, about Community Arts so I was kind of like quite in contact with Community Arts around the country...So they very kindly, I was sort of, I had a nice in with the Gulbenkian, they gave us the equipment which was stolen a week later.

...that is stolen just days later

We put the equipment, brand new equipment in to one of these rooms and had the lock, locked it, double locked it etc etc. And we came back one morning and somebody had been, had made hole right through the wall from next door and it was stolen, and little bits were left behind because whoever stole it didn't realise you needed all the cables, and all this and all that you know. So we decided that what we'd do, we sort of, I think Tony had a clue of somebody who might have been involved and we started with that and we sat there for 3 days and 3 nights and we got the whole lot back. Because we explained to them that they wouldn't be able to sell it, and they hadn't got enough of it to make it work, and I think we had a little tip off from somebody in the newsagent as well. But that was very important I think in terms of our relationships with the estate, that we weren't actually that foolish and we weren't also going to lob them in.

Linking up networks on the estate to create a joint enterprise

A clear memory I have of nights on the Aylesbury was that we of course had to do a lot of fund-raising, we were always having visits from the Arts Council or Gulbenkian or whoever it was. And we had a really good system of doing it in the end where we could kind of...the kids were very involved and you needed to time it so something was happening in every workshop as the visitors came down the walkways, you know. So you'd have these scouts and lookouts and...so that as you arrived at the silkscreen workshop you know a print just happened to be being rolled out and so on - this would happen right through the estate. And I mean all of that was very unifying, I think, in a way that...it was a joint enterprise that we were getting these big-wigs to come down and give us the money!...so we could get more equipment and things.

From the Aylesbury Estate to the forests of Cameroon

I think we founded it the Walworth and Aylesbury Community Arts Trust in about '72 and I left by '76 to go to Cameroon!... My husband was an anthropologist and our daughter came with us and we lived and walked in the rainforest for two years.

It was quite a difficult decision to make, to go to Cameroon because obviously I was working in London and you know very busy with all sorts of things as well as Walworth & Aylesbury. But it would have been I think to have not gone, and for Alice our daughter not to have gone...it would have been a very huge gap. Two years is a long time for a child, and also a long time for a marriage, and I think it was really important that we went. And it was a life changing experience. I mean there's nothing like being completely out of your norms and living with people who you don't know at all and who's language you don't speak, and having to be dependent on them for food and housing and everything. It's a very good experience and we certainly enjoyed it immensely.

We were also working for the BBC Schools Programmes - we made...what were called radio-vision programmes, which meant that you had some slides to go with them. We made 5 programmes...on different aspects of hunting and gathering and ceremonies, and life with the Baka really.

Alice was the best Baka speaker of the 3 of us, so she did most of the translation. Um because Baka was a tonal language so very - and unwritten - so it was very difficult for us as adults to learn it well. We were understood by the end, within our group but I don't think we were ever understood by a wider group because our accents were so appalling!

Returning to England and unemployment in 1979

We came back from Cameroon in 1979, to unemployment virtually...I don't think it was the three day week, but there was a huge financial crisis going on in England. Robert had been promised a full-time job at the LSE which turned out to be only two days a week because they'd had their money cut. And I hadn't got anything to do really...And...that's really when I began working with video in Brighton, which is where we lived.

Establishing Barefoot Video workshop in Brighton in the early 1980s

Barefoot video was eventually a franchise workshop with Channel 4, but it started off just being a video workshop. It started off with three women and we had, we got an office in Hove, just across the border from Brighton. We worked full-time and we had funding from Southern Arts.

We had sort of you know numerous projects around town, like the Moulsecoomb by Sea one that we were sort of working on, and the Newhaven project. And then we ran workshops, I think about five times a year which were a week or two weeks, where people actually learnt how to make films - and then hopefully came and borrowed the equipment and went and made films, you know, so we weren't involved closely with absolutely every single film.

Working with unemployed youth in Newhaven

There was a very good youth worker in Newhaven and he had a huge problem with unemployed youth there and he, we sort of set him up really as a sort of independent person and he made films there with youth.

Health or Human Rights, 1984

A little bit later at least, we got Channel 4 workshop funding through Alan Fountain. And that gave us three years security basically, but meant that we had to produce one broadcast film a year, which was quite a big demand particularly when we started with, the film we started with was *Health & Human Rights* which actually took 2 years to make.

In *Health & Human Rights* because they were actually three films that were completely separate to begin with... There was the elderly people's film, there was the health workers' film and then there was the film of the meeting, which all together formed the film for Channel 4, but were re-cut for Channel 4 because we had to make it so it sort of worked with the three of them

The key level was probably the elderly group who were actually able to spend much more time and be behind the camera themselves. The health workers were really an editorial group, they didn't learn to use cameras, it was not practical... The big plus of working with the elderly at the beginning part of it, which is where we started... was that they knew from their side of things what it was like, and they could describe it, they could visit it, they could, you know, pull out lots of information that we wouldn't have had as younger people.

Once we got to the on-street health workers like the District Nurse and the Health Visitors and people like that, they felt confidence in us because the elderly people felt confidence in us, and so that was again a very good liaison that worked and alliance that grew. And through them getting in to the hospitals was of course much easier because the District Nurse gave us links in.

Enabling the elderly to shoot video and represent their own experience

The health professionals were very aware of - they were being filmed by the elderly and that was very revealing to them I think in lots of ways. And at the same time a lot of the health professionals felt under threat as well, because it was a moment where funding for the NHS was in great danger, and they had very good gerontologists in Brighton.

There weren't many good Homes around although there were lots of private Homes opening up and making money, and I think everyone was worried about that, right through the health service and obviously the elderly themselves. And so there was real alliance of interest between the elderly and these different layers of caring...organisations from the District Nurses through to the hospital itself.

Most of it was shot by the elderly people anyway, but the things like the meeting and the stuff in the hospital was shot by us, and we had one person who was a camera person and who did that, and we did whatever, we did sound or organising or producing - I mean I think I was the producer of that film really.

Alliance building encourages many small courageous acts.

We also had an outlying range of contacts in Brighton & Hove through other films we had been making... And one of the very important ones was a group of people who we worked with several times who were originally complaining about their housing, and lived on a big housing estate in Brighton, where their gardens were polluted by some kind of previous building work. And we worked with them and discovered that they were all illiterate...or the vast majority of them were illiterate, so we had to work a way of making a script with them where they didn't actually have to write anything down but they could work together. And that made some great bonds between us and we had a very good outcome from that film.

And so when we started working with the elderly, we were talking to that group at some point, and one of the younger women said actually I work in a private care home and they're very... I would like to expose it to you. And she got us in to this home where there were 8 national health patients in the attics sharing 1 flannel, and it was a pretty horrific scene... And of course we realised it would cost her her job, but she insisted that she didn't mind and did it - so you see her in the film... She talks about how little care they get and the way that they're treated in this very wealthy dentist's private care home and you know...it wasn't the only one like that, there were more of them - quite a lot of them in fact...So that was a revelation to us and we certainly wouldn't have known about it or been able to get in there without her.

So there were a lot of small courageous acts that were very telling. And in fact you know the District Nurse who's so softly spoken and sweet but she also had taken us - a group of young women with cameras - in to peoples homes and negotiated it for us, and taken risks, and done all that. And the gerontologist from, consultant from Sussex from the Royal Sussex Hospital, had challenged the health service over it and spoken out in public. So people, because of their alliances, and this is why alliance building I go on and on about it, there's safety in numbers, there's safety in the cross referral of people at different stages in their careers and disciplines being together on something which is, it's not the

same as going on a demo, it's actually much more considered and it's really worked out and people respect that, and I think that was the value of it.

The wider impacts of *Health or Human Rights*

It got 27 private Homes closed which was quite important, and it created a sense of tremendous triumph amongst the elderly who had taken part, I mean they all got a terrific kick out of it. And I can remember the public meeting when the National Health inspectorate came down and that's the meeting that was at the heart of the film as it was shown on Channel 4... and there was one woman who was in her 80s and the only room we could get hold of for that meeting that was big enough was up some stairs so she actually went up the stairs on her back side, and then spoke energetically at the whole meeting and then crawled down again afterwards - and that was just amazing that there was that commitment from people.

Expanding the use of video to enable alliances between rural communities and government

I began to see...this whole idea of having representation and alliance building between very poor people in villages in...rural Africa and Vietnam and all over the place, all over the world really, using video to make alliances with their local and then national government, and between each other. And I worked in Vietnam with Oxfam.

We made three films in North Vietnam and they were used sort of both locally and internationally as a way of looking at how people could represent themselves to their own governments, and that's really the thing that I developed right through to the early 2000s when I was working in Malawi and Sierra Leone.

Alliance building as a key theme: video as a site for negotiations

Well, I've talked a bit about alliance building and I think that's very important...that lead me...that's become a main theme for me, this idea that communities can't represent themselves alone because they're part of a network, and that network has all different kinds of hierarchies within it, from local government to national government, and different agencies and all that sort of thing. And what you discover certainly - and it becomes more apparent when you're in a strange place - is that most of that is written down and illiterate people can't actually access it at all. So the meeting between, the face to face meeting between those people has to be negotiated in some way, and video is an amazing way for people to negotiate because it's quite impressive, you know, it's exciting, people enjoy making it - or you hope they enjoy making it - but then also

people are impressed when they're shown it - unexpected filmmakers, village people you know, poor people, illiterate people, and it's unexpected and the fact that it gives them the confidence to speak out, and then they get more confidence by seeing people watching them - that's a very important process I think, that builds alliances because both sides come together - there's a sort of mutual respect and a mutual understanding. Because in an edited film, which we're talking about, people have thought out how they're going to say things and how they're going to express things, and...how they sometimes make people laugh, and sometimes make people cry, and that's actually all very important stuff. And it's - to me that's why I find the term Community Video a bit vague. I think one has to talk about representation and alliance building, and be very specific about what ones trying to do.