

John White
Edited LCVA interview
Interviewer: Zoe Kinross

"I was chipping away at a monolith with a screwdriver"

Portrait of John White
Born Woking, Surrey (UK)
Lives & works in London
Founder of Albany Video
Community Video Activist

Growing Up

I was born in Woking in Surrey and my father was in the army so we travelled around every two three years we lived in France for two years and then we lived in Buckinghamshire for two years and then I went to boarding school.

I have been I have been on television talking about boarding school. Not a good experience really. But I mean you know that it's real it's you know. There are things to say about that because I ended up in a working class community and I wasn't the only one in my generation who ended up in a very different place from what you'd expect.

If you grow up in a relatively privileged environment, you don't grow up with a very strong sense of community really. You don't grow up with a tremendously strong sense of connection you know because you don't tend to live in an area, you tend to live quite separately. Whereas people who you know broadly speaking people who live in less privileged conditions and who suffer oppression of one kind or another do tend to rely on community to survive. You know there's some interesting comments in the film in the Downham film that we were showing this morning that Jeff made where you find people who are living in really poor conditions in very difficult circumstances saying we helped each other out. Well people in middle class and upper middle class homes don't tend to help each other out except in wartime because they're too busy being aspirational and climbing over each other.

I remember when I was at boarding school, when I was young maybe eleven, looking at underground maps of London and being fascinated by New Cross and New Cross Gate because they were at the bottom of the east London line. Which is about the furthest that I could imagine from my own experience of growing up, New Cross and New Cross Gate.

Guildford Technical College **Getting into Counterculture**

I failed something like five different A-levels at one of the country's leading academic public schools. Which says something about what the experience was like for me I think that's rare but I did that so I actually went to Guildford technical college to pass my A-levels.

So I ended up in a more normal world less rarefied world with regular folk which is probably where I would have been better off anyway really. I was involved in all kinds of counter culture stuff for you know fringe arts one kind or another - writing. I was quite busy writing poetry at that time and I was in I was in theatre shows at the Guildford technical

college and I played the drums in bands so I was quite active in a creative sense.

There was a lot of experimental art in that time which came under that sort of banner of arts labs. So we had a thing in Guildford called the Guildford Arts Lab which started out of poetry readings in coffee bars and became bigger and bigger arts events and tied up with the music scene.

First contact with The Brighton Combination

We all went from Guildford to a festival in Brighton called the South Sea Bubble in probably '69 or '70 something like that and I came into contact with a French theatre company called the Brighton Combination which was actually an arts lab in Brighton. It was a building when I arrived and so I was excited by all of that was going on I attached myself to that company. And as I was attaching myself to that company they were packing up their base in Brighton and going off on the road as a touring theatre company. So that's what I did.

The Brighton Combination in London Social work as a middle class career

That company The Brighton Combination settled in Deptford at the Albany after being a touring company for two or three years. We came to Deptford in the Albany which was a different building at that time. An old Mission building a big old rambling Victorian building. But it was sort of turned upside down by a bunch of long haired revolutionary types.

There was a whole tradition of the time, more so, that there was you know a lot of middle class people were coming out of university and becoming social workers and community workers. There was a very different ethos that educated young people came out of university and actually wanted to do things in the service of social justice. There was much more of a sense of collective endeavor that people are all in it together which is the post-war ethos which is gone completely evaporated you know Thatcher put an end to that in the 80s really.

First experience of Video & Meeting John Hopkins

My first experience of seeing video being used as an animating process if you like which is what I became interested in, was the Glasgow Festival I think in 1972. I happened to go up there with a guy called John Hopkins who was quite a major figure in the counterculture of the time and he had been commissioned to do some work for the Glasgow festival. And he was a photographer who recently was experimenting with video. And he set up what was essentially a play project in the street in a tenement housing area in the Gorbals which is west of Glasgow across the other side of Clyde. It's all been knocked down and cleared out and cleansed since those days. This was a project where half a dozen two foot round polystyrene pillars were just dumped in the street, they were huge long polystyrene pillars. But they were fantastic playthings for kids very very big. You could roll them around because they were polystyrene and light you could roll them around sticking them up on and knock them down again so all the kids from the surrounding streets came and played and we recorded all this on video cameras. So this was 1972 when the very first black and white portable video cameras were available. So this is the very beginning of that technology. And then the interesting thing about that was not the shooting not the filming but the playback process which was in the evening.

We drew the van up at the end of the street and got the power from the cable up to one of the tenements you know two stories up tenement flat and stuck the monitors in the back of a van and played back all the material that had been shot during the day with the kids playing basically. But it wasn't particularly remarkable it was just they were great toys to play with. But what happened was the whole street came out to see their kids playing. So you had this collective experience of people you know seeing themselves on television which is quite magic to see even though it's a very different you know there's no where you're not you're not on broadcast television but because everybody is used to seeing television to see your own kids on television was quite a magic experience.

Influence of Challenge for Change (National Film Board of Canada)

Challenge for Change was a big program that lasted some years. It was a catalyst for me but I was engaged only with some of their very early projects. The Fogo island project which was as I remember it was it was a community whose livelihood from fishing was in decline. And so the filmmaker went to the island and documented what was going on on that island are what people wanted. Well you know what how they wanted to make the community work over a long period of time and he did a whole series of made a whole series of short films which were played back to people and they lead on to other films. So it was using film in a very particular way to help that community articulate what change they wanted in order to make the community viable.

And that was a very interesting process to read about. And I think in the case of Fogo Island it was quite it was documented as a success and it was fairly clear that the film making and the showing back of the films did have a powerful animating effect on that community.

I connected that with the research that I did. And this same guy John Hopkins he was commissioned by the Home Office to write a report on the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change program so he basically re hashed the research and the reports that were coming out of the National Film Board's Challenge for Change program for the Home Office over here.

First work as Albany Video Pepys Estate

My idea was to try and translate the community development process involving film and video that I'd read about in the Challenge for Change program to try and translate that to working with the tenants organisation on the Pepys Estate which was a big estate near the river in Deptford.

And I took on the role of the sort of resident filmmaker. I was just on my own working on this vast estate and I think that what I was trying to do was very ambitious and I didn't put all the building blocks in place and do it gradually over a period of time you know. If you look at what happened in the Fogo Island project there were a lot of films made over a long period of time you know. And I was one person with a Portapak who barely knew how to make a film. And I had a lot of enthusiasm and I had good contacts in the community. But I didn't have enough support.

It needed to have been pursued like a documentary film never a period of time. And I didn't have the means to do that and I didn't know that that even the right way to approach it

really. And I hadn't understood that you have to work systematically over a long period of time.

But quite quickly I got into doing something that the tenants association wanted me to do because they could see the place was it was a big big big estate huge housing estate. And there was always repairs and maintenance work that wasn't getting done and the authority the GLC was quite distant and so they were always campaigning and complaining about state maintenance and repairs and improvements. And what you could do with the video camera was document stuff so they could see use for that. And I put together several different whole series actually of different mini documentaries showing the state of the estate and what needed repairing.

I let the big vision that I had about using which I'd gotten for Challenge for Change about using video as a community organising tool I let that go because I couldn't see how to make it work and I didn't at the time I didn't realise this but I was never going to make it work on my own without more infrastructure and support and thought and planning really. But what there was an immediate need for was using video for it in two areas. One in play with young people and two was in creating specific campaign video. So that's what I did.

After Peyps, Importance of Community Workers

I think one of the things the lessons that I learned from the work on Pepys estate that it was if I was going to be doing any sort of campaigning or activist work with local tenants organisations it wasn't appropriate for me to try and do it on my own. So most of the rest of the work that I did after that period was alongside community workers.

You know in this day and age it's difficult to even understand what a community worker is or was you know. And they were social workers or people from that tradition whose job was to help the community organise itself you know to help people to speak to articulate what their needs were and to bring people together that was their job.

There aren't really you know there are no local council funded workers of that kind anymore as far as I know.

August 13th (1977)

The August 13th video started out as a kind of a commission from an organisation called ALCARAF which was the All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism. Of course the National Front were getting quite big at that time you know and the National Front liked to organise in working class areas where they thought they would get support from people who felt you know threatened by people of colour or whatever you know. And they did get some support although not massive support but anyway they decided to march in Deptford on that particular day in 1977 I think it was so there was a big countermarch which was organised by ALCARAF and ALCARAF commissioned us to document that march and the activities that went on around it and later on of course after that march had broken up it was it became a riot you know it became a much bigger thing. So we pulled together. We documented the ALCARAF march we pulled together footage that various people have shot of the riots afterwards. And also we I think the third part of the film was us talking to a couple of young black guys that we knew from the neighborhood to see how they'd experienced it and what they felt about the National Front organising in this area.

What I remember is the day it was a oh it was a piece in three distinct parts. I mean I'm hoping that all three parts still exist. I think that was one of the things that made it quite

interesting and made it distributable is because it had three different takes on what happened that day.

Us Girls (1979)

Us Girls came out of the theatre work that had developed out of The Brighton Combination's permanent residency in the Albany. I think it was Mary Sheridan my colleague at the time had the idea for adapting the girls part of that play as a video drama.

Young people used to come into the building and used to come in and take and people we're talking a young working class people from local estates would come in and take part in drama activities. So it was an organic process. But having said that it was an organic process there was a you know a conscious effort to do outreach work which would bring young working class people in and give them an opportunity to do stuff that they wouldn't otherwise have done and Us Girls is a really good example of that because there you get you know four or five working class girls getting an opportunity to express themselves through that script in a way that they probably wouldn't have had a chance to do if that creative facility hadn't been there.

The kids role in Us Girls was to be actors so they weren't professionals or semi-professional as we were shooting it. And I edited it. I would say by that time I was just about I would call myself a professional by that time.

Evolution of Albany Video Channel 4

I'm proud of all the work that Albany Video did right from the beginning. But you have to remember that it was part of a cultural movement which was supported all round by a cultural movement which is different now very much more diffuse or I couldn't trace it necessarily just like that but you know Albany Video later as you know was supported by became an ACT franchise workshop and then was supported by Channel 4. But that was possible because there was a culture at Channel 4 which allowed that to happen you know which said that ok let's get other voices on television you know other than the ones we see every day. Let's see what's going on in other communities let people talk to each other in a different way. And that culture was supportive particularly by Alan Fountain at Channel 4 and Rod Stowman and people like that.

I myself worked as an editor on a series for Channel 4 called A Free For All which was a whole series of campaigning programs created in local communities around specific issues made by professional filmmakers but working with community activists around the country. And that was quite a pioneering series. You know all those initiatives have gone. And I think that's partly because the hope is gone and the you know the oppositional oomph has gone you know. And that's why you see thousands of people turning up for Jeremy Corbyn's rallies now because you know whatever you think of him as an organiser a leader he is able to articulate opinions and themes that people haven't heard for years. So he represents hope in that regard.

Hi8us L8r (2003-2008)

The continuity in all of my work through Albany video through to later work with Hi8us that Andy Porter founded as later work with Hi8us. And then even right through to my more

recent work with Aftershock Productions is representing people's voices in a different way to how you see them you know on the whole represented in mass media really that's the difference.

The interesting thing for me was L8r was developed as an interactive project which was a drama where the audience could contribute to the story so it was a two way process. I was always interested in process, that process the communication process not just the making.

I really particularly enjoyed with L8r and the spin offs from L8r - L8r Younger's, I enjoyed the process of you know developing stories with young people particularly developing stories that came to some degree at least out of their own lives.

Thoughts on distribution

The thing that's exciting today is that distribution is a piece of cake you know so whereas we would shoot something and edit in on video and the only way you get people to watch it was setting up a monitor and make certain people came to see it. I mean there is some value in that because we have to physically get people together to do it which is part of the business of organising community organising people need to get together. But in the first instance to get people to see a film and to see their neighbors on film. It was hard to do that.

Whereas now you would put it on YouTube and you put a flyer through a door you know everybody's door to tell them it's on YouTube and then you know what I mean or you publicise it on social media or you'd use your social media as part of the organising process. I mean that goes on I think you know social media is now being used all over the world as an organising tool and right through the you know the Middle Eastern revolutions it's a celebrated documentation isn't it of what's gone on how social media has been used.

But on a much smaller scale you could be doing that kind of work we were trying to do in using film and video as part of a community organising process people could be doing that now much more effectively. Although having said that the infrastructure of professional organisers and training and professional workers isn't there anymore because the funding for all that's gone.

Arguably television and broadcasting and the internet are more pluralistic now. At that time they weren't. You know there were three channels three television channels which were sort of you know heavily mediated if you like so we didn't think there were very many. You couldn't see alternative voices you couldn't. You didn't see people of colour represented you didn't see different political voices on television. You didn't see it in you know there was a range of voices including feminist voices that you just didn't see and that weren't represented. So there was a huge movement at that time you know across media people wanting to represent themselves.

Learned experience

Looking to the future

A lot of my actual experience over the time when I was working I didn't feel like I was being very successful. Like with the Pepys work that I was telling you about I was trying to chip away at a monolith with a screwdriver really which I don't think I realised that. And so it was quite dispiriting at the time in some ways.

I don't think I really even barely knew what I was doing when I started off with this thing called Albany Video. But I just had a lot of energy and enthusiasm I guess. Kind-of naïve enthusiasm maybe but I do feel proud of what it turned into because you know a lot of good people came on board over the years Geoff Stowe, Mary Sheridan, Tony.

And we you know a lot of interesting work was done over a number of years. So I'm I'm proud of the fact that I started it at all. And I'm really I'm excited that this documentation is going on now because I think my great hope would be that people who look at this material will pick out some of the ethos some of the original ethos around you know applied filmmaking applied creativity and will run with it in a different direction now you know.

So I suppose I felt like I started out trying to change the world like a lot of other people from my generation.