

Jon Dovey
Edited LCVA Interview
Interviewer: Rosie Saunders

There wasn't one method or approach

I'm a kind of grammar school boy with an Oxford education. You know I came from a kind of a really ordinary working background. My dad was a printer my mum worked in a post office. I was brought up on the Wednesday Play in the 1960s. I was born on the day that commercial television started in this country. So I mean television was part of my education it was a really big part of my young life as a new medium and um I learnt a lot about the world from television. I talked politics and television all the time in my family with my dad and my mum, especially my dad. So I came... Then I went to Oxford and read English and became really interested in image making and in um ideas around image making but completely outside of my course and unsupported by my course. And started thinking about making photographs and making, making film and picking up a video camera for the first time.

So I knew when I left university that I was interested in working in the media. Um though that's not what I called it at the time because I don't think we even used the word media properly at that point. Lots of my contemporaries were going off to being interviewed by the BBC or into news into news journalism and so on and that was a kind of a route that I tried to follow and checked out. And actually had three interviews at the BBC got to final boards at the BBC three times. And each time finished up saying but what you put on television is rubbish. It's terrible. We've got to change how television works it's not good enough and realised eventually that that probably wasn't the best way to get a job working at the BBC um in those days.

So I moved to London in '79 and tried ridiculously to set up a film co-op in Notting Hill with some people that I met. Um didn't know that Andy Porter was operating just round the corner with er in something called community video because I didn't even know that community video really existed. But on the other hand it was of the times and of the culture so it wasn't an entirely unexpected idea. Hence trying to set up a film co-op, you know let's have a film co-op. Let's make let's make films with the people for the people and for us and let's you know just very optimistic.

And then um a job got advertised in Time Out to be a distribution coordinator for a community video operation called the Two Boroughs Video Project which was a small project that was funded by Wandsworth Council and Lambeth Council to set up a video access resource in South Londo and it was based at a place

called Oval House which at that time was in Kennington it's just about to move to Brixton but it was it was located in Kennington and it had been run by a guy called Nick Fry for about three or f, three years maybe so I guess some sort of 75 to 78 something like that. He'd been kind of running this project with a little bit of money and some kit in the Oval and they wanted to appoint a distribution coordinator. So I applied for the job which was two days a week and 20 quid and that's how I started working in community video. I got the job.

Oval video 1979 – 1982

So at that time in 1979 when I started working there, there was a whole wide range of demands on our resources. First of all there were the community groups and young people's groups, children's groups, youth groups.

Black youth groups in an around Brixton and I remember working with Abeng Centre or delivering equipment to Abeng Centre and working with Brixton young black family housing association and making projects with them.

Housing tenants groups involved in different kinds of dispute with local authorities. I used to call them the damp tapes because it was always about people complaining about damp in their flats, which they were always told was a lifestyle issue. Which meant that they cooked with the windows shut you know and caused condensation.

Some trade union work, there was some kind of employment rights work and then there was lots of stuff with bands, there's loads of stuff with bands and music as the equipment got better and as people understood to what music promo was there was massive demand for music, which you have to resist a bit because it kind of wasn't what we were briefed and funded to do. But there was also a way of making money if you needed to make some money you could probably get some money by getting a band to pay you to do a gig.

Performance art and video had quite a strong relationship from the early days. So there was a sort of steady trickle of performance artists who wanted to work with video because video had a role in live art from quite early on in the 1970s. Live artists and performance artists were quite interested in video so I can remember working with some live artists.

So the work was a range of can we hire some kit... Can we just take the kit away? Can you train us how to use the kit? Can you help us make a film? Those sort of three levels of just providing access, servicing equipment, making sure that it all stayed working, and then running schemes and short projects with people and then actually making making a film over a period of time with people.

Performance Art, Video and Radical Theatre

Because we were based at the Oval which was a radical theatre we had a lot of work with radical theatre people, so as well as doing all of that stuff very quickly I was working with some some improvisational comics called Jim Sweeney and Steve Steen who, who used to make shows and Nick. Nick was a really close mates so we used to work with them putting on shows where they had monitors on stage. So this is really early on. This is as I say 1979/1980. They were doing shows with the kind of live feedback and images of themselves that were on monitors. They were talking to characters on monitors on stage and also doing improvisation with that kind of technology, or we were doing projections as part of the stage show, or we were recording theatre companies like...experimental theatre companies like IOU and Welfare State and Gay Sweatshop and Footsbarn and all those kinds of people that came out of that mid '70s radical theatre from hippie to gay, and across that spectrum because they came into the Oval, and because Nick had a lot of relationships with those people over time. He had been there kind of go to video guy from the mid seventies when he picked up a video camera kind of coming out of art school. He was at Croydon art school and he started doing video three or four years before me.

So he...so he knew a lot of those people because were at The Oval. So there's a big part of our work that was actually creative work, and actually was doing work not that...not on...access issues or the politics, or political issues and community struggles, but was actually doing stuff with Gay Sweatshop or Footsbarn that was completely bonkers and crazy and interesting in a different kind of way to me, you know, so, those two things are a really important mix of the cultural creative and the political activist, and those two things that were what distinguished Oval video, a bit, from some of the other people in the in the community video workers group at that time.

So there was kind of community work, solidarity work, servicing community groups, hiring equipment and it was all across a range from, from music to performance art to theatre to community activism and these things was just kind of part of the spectrum which we sort of balanced and juggled as we went along according to a pretty sort of loose editorial plan really. I hesitate to call it a Plan because we didn't have one, we did what came along.

So um and it it really sort of spoke to me you know it stuck. It worked for me because it was about actually giving voice. And it was about making critical content and it was also about having fun as a filmmaker and doing all the fun things that I thought filmmaking would unlock for me as well. So so yeah that was kind of my own my own journey into it.

Video camera technology : the Portapak and instant playback - a revolutionary moment

When I first started working in community video most people were still working on reel-to-reel, black and white Portapacks which was the technologies that had been around for 20 years from America but only really for about...slightly, slightly less than 10 years I suppose through the seventies in the UK. So you had a camera that was about this size, and had a trigger handle, had a handle with a trigger on it, and it had an eyepiece at the back end of the camera that you flipped up, you had a monitor with an eyepiece and a zoom lens, and a cable, a big thick cable that connected to a reel-to-reel tape recorder, effectively looked like a tape recorder, and it was in a...Had a shoulder strap so you wore it around your shoulder and carried it around and you shot 30 minute reels of black and white video. And as long as you didn't, as long as you didn't put, stand the, stand the case on its end. If you took a Sony Portapack and you stood the case on its end the take up spool got jammed. So when you opened the case it just was full of video tape that just went (makes explosive noise!), all over the place as it did once to me at Hyde Park. That was one lesson that you as a film maker, one of those lessons you only learn once, that was one of them. Never put a Sony Portapack on its bum when you're recording.

You could also then use those reel-to-reel recorders as a playback machine. So you could plug the recorder into a monitor. I think always using the RF antenna input because the monitors only had radio RF antenna inputs. There was no other kind of input on the back of a television.

What that meant was that you could record something and play it back straightaway to the people that you had recorded it with which in the history of moving image media was a revolutionary moment because you didn't have to send the film to the chemist, as Geoff Stow used to call it, the great thing about video is you don't have to send the film to the chemist. You didn't have to send a film to the lab so you could just play stuff back straight away so it was immediate feedback. That was a really massive thing in the 1970s because people had were not used to seeing themselves they, didn't know what they look like on television. They knew they knew what other people...how other people represented them, but actually that technology was...that accessibility of the image was unthinkable in todays times that actually because its, our own image making is ubiquitous now. So actually to be able to do that was, was amazing at that time.

And actually quite a lot of the...so for instance when I was talking earlier on about doing stuff with children's groups or playgroups or youth groups. A lot of the time you just set the equipment up and let children see themselves on the monitor. And they would just, they would just pull faces because they had never seen themselves on television screen before ever. So the beginning of that was always just doing that really simple play activity with getting people used to seeing themselves and what they look like and then starting to think about what

they could do. And because it was immediate you could always go, "So lets look at that back, lets see did that work."

Fight the cuts, 1980

The first film that I ever made, when I worked at Oval, was called 'Fight the Cuts' and it was about cuts and it was a film that I could have made every two years since. Because it was a film about the impact of cuts on local authority services. And I can remember being in nurseries and in schools and in libraries and outside health centres and doing voxpop interviews with people and talking to activists and going to rallies and just documenting this process. And I remember at the beginning of the film was an interview clip from Panorama between Margaret Thatcher and Robin Day, that was that that was how the film opened, was Margaret Thatcher saying something preposterous which went on to become a dominant theme of the rest of my career.

So it's extraordinary that I did that. That was a first...that was the first sequence of the first film I ever made. And that was about a 20 minute film or so. And that was shown that was designed to be shown a campaign meetings, It was a kind of solid..It was essentially what I would call a solidarity film so that was a kind of category of film that you made to show to campaign meetings to help build movements and build solidarity between groups and allow people to express what they were feeling and show what was going on and show that there was resistance and there was action there was organisation going on around these kinds of issues and that actually something that was going on in one bit of the borough or one bit of town was relevant to something that was going on in another bit of town. So doing that kind of connection around local media, letting people understand what was going on in different places. But of course the whole thing took months to make and by the time it got out it was kind of, you know, things change. It wasn't exactly TV news schedules.

Primitive video editing technology

In the days of analogue tape you had to have pre-roll and pre-roll was this really weird thing that actually really messed you up and made it really hard to do what you wanted to do because actually in film you cut the film you splice it together that makes the film. In video you do not cut the video. You move the signal, you copy the signal from one video taped to another. And to be able to copy the signal the video tape has to be running at a certain speed you can't just go 'on', 'copy', because it takes five seconds for the signal to stabilise. Because if you turn a real to real video deck on this five seconds it's just going (*makes whirring noise*) and the pictures all over the place, so you don't get a stable signal for five seconds. So you have to have this five second running time so you have, you want that picture at that frame to move to that other tape to copy across at that precise moment, but you've got to have both machines running for five seconds

before and, so that was really complex that's what you had to have a loop on the floor to create five seconds of pre-roll, or a loop somewhere. You had to.

So that by the time that loop had taken up it was running and that was when measuring time. But then we began to get...a then we began to invent these technologies to make that sync up, and 'Hoppy' John Hopkins who you probably have already heard of at 'Fantasy Factory' up in Theobalds Road in Holborn, who was a, who was a hippy video person from the '60s. Would work with Pink Floyd and then got into video and all that stuff. He was a very important part of our history because he had invented..He'd built the first automated reel-to-reel edit suite in his facility. And so what we were doing was kind of copying something and making something of our own in the Oval that allowed us to be able to edit.

It's really interesting talking about it because I'm remembering, 'oh my god', that was so laborious and so time consuming and so random. And how did you ever make a cut? How did you ever learn anything about editing when the chances of actually getting the cut in the right place was sort of 50/50 at best? You know.

Developments in technology and theory - Understanding the medium

Sort of between 1979 and 1982, which is when I was working in this field. Things changed pretty fast and I came in at the end of the black and white reel-to-reel moment and actually moved through into then, into the colour three tube camera and pneumatic period and then into actually shortly after that VHS as a system. So things became a lot better quality and also they'd be, they were in colour and...You could do a lot more over a very short period of time really at the beginning of the 1980s. And that changed the kind of thing we could do and who we could work with and where that work went quite a lot.

People began to understand what the language of filmmaking was and what the language of media was. I mean I think this is quite an important thing archiveally to record was that in the seventies. In the 70s the kind of groups that created community videos as a notion were arguing that media was important channel through which politics and resistance and activism and culture could be conducted. And was the first time this channel had been established theoretically and technologically. The theory didn't exist, the technology didn't exist.

The first meeting of the London community video workers collective as it was known that I went to, and I was young, because they're all a bit older than me. So I went along with this fresh faced University graduate and they were all sitting around and we were recommended to read Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 'Theory for the Constituents of the Media' as a set text for this meeting. And I thought oh my goodness what's going on here. I've just come out of university and I hadn't come across the Frankfurt School at all, I mean I went to a very traditional university [and] wasn't allowed to have critical theory in my world.

'What's this about!?. I thought this is about a thought about making films and being creative', and here they are sitting around really this really challenging complex text. And it wasn't till, I guess about 20 years later that I realised how interesting and how important that was. That that collection of people, Andy Porter, Tony Dowmont, and a few other people and a few of the people had decided that they wanted to do some self education around the theory of what it was that they were doing, they'd also all kind of fallen into the technology and the potential of the technology. But this was a kind of theoretical justification.

So in the 1970s the idea that media was important at all as a as a cultural political site was new. By the time you got to 1981, 1982, 1983 it was becoming much more understood a much more part of everyday culture and lived culture. So the ideas that you could exchange with people and what you could do started to change.

So we started to get more equipment, we started to get colour equipment, people started to understand the language more, have better ideas. So a key, a key film was a film called 'Watch out, There's a Queer about'

Watch out! There's a Queer about, 1981

'Watch Out there's a Queer About' was a really interesting idea that came from that kind of mixture of activism and creativity that I was talking about earlier on. So a guy called Andy Lippman was part of "Gay Sweatshop" but he was also a lawyer that worked in a law centre in that Deptford. And is a gay activist. And he got hold of the law as it stood in relation to policing the gay community in London in 1981 or 2 and got hold of the legal textbooks that were taught to cops up at Hendon, and took all of the passages that were about actually how you police gay, the gay community and turned it into a script for a spoof documentary that was made as a police training film where the cast was entirely gay or very queer and err but was made as if it was for the police. So it was a really interesting ironic taking a piss funny hilarious politically charged educational. It told you about your rights, it told you that if, you know, if the police bust your nightclub and come and come kick the door down this is what you need to know what is going on you know. And it and it mobilised the whole community of people around that issue and it became quite successful.

So it's quite a sophisticated project you know it's it's because it's fictionalizing something which is documentary content. It's using using a lot of creative um resources that came from the theatre world including costume and design and mise en scene and all those kinds of things and music you know as well as it as well as mobilizing that creative community um to actually make a very very pointed political argument.

So that was very very different to the film that would have been made two or three or four years before which would have been a very boring set of talking heads in grey on grey black and white talking about that about what your rights are if you're gay and you happened to be arrested in a nightclub or whatever it would have been extremely dull whereas this was actually frankly hilarious. So so that represents a kind of shift which is both a cultural shift and a technological split between the late 70s and the early 80s as people became more aware of what media could do and how you could work with it and what resources you could bring to bear.

Go For It! 1982

Also a film called Go For It which was a kind of youth training film which is which was which was used a mixture of dramatic reconstruction it was about training young people in interview techniques so it used dramatic interview setups and told a little story about being jobless. It was the beginning of the 80s and unemployment was suddenly a huge issue. So job training and how people could could how young people could find their way into employment was a really major issue. And that was quite a sophisticated production compared to the level of what we'd done before.

The Community Video Network & the London Filmmakers Co-op

The community video network in London when I entered into about 1978 in 1979 was pretty well developed I think. My sense of it was that I got to know a lot of people in a really short space of time in places that I had never heard of before like Deptford. And um. In particular there was was the Albany outfit down in Deptford and then there was the West London group which Andy Porter was part of um and Ken Lineham. And then there was Hoppy's group in in Holborn and then there was Oval video. And then there was Islington Bus Company who had a video outfit and they were quite important too. They did, they had quite a highly developed video practice and then there was Inter-Action Arts up in Kentish town and they again had been doing video for quite a long time and had a highly developed video outfit and quite a slick operation actually.

So there were a five or six centres across London and that probably sounds like absolutely nothing but we were in pretty good contact and especially Deptford, especially the Albany and the Oval and West London. There was quite a lot of his historical connection there and as things went along you know because you got equipment people got to know you pretty soon.

Equipment was very was scarce so if you were in the community and you wanted to get hold of something you know you knew where to get it because because

there wasn't a lot of it around so that's why people were. Scarcity produced a strong network.

There were disagreements massively within the group you know. So Inter-Action Arts in Kentish Town I mean they had a way of doing things and you didn't do things that wasn't their way if you worked for them. The West London group and the Albany group had a particular kind of politics that they were really trying to work out on the ground. You know that was a proper praxis in action kind of struggling with it and trying to make it happen with a political programme hence reading Hans Magnus Enzensberger for fun.

But then the group that I was with you know actually we actually just used to just do stuff because we thought it was beautiful pretty or interesting or exciting or because we thought it would be fun to go to Copenhagen and work on the festival of falls for a week and work with a whole load of performers on the dock side you know.

We didn't always we didn't always privilege participation or the purity of that kind of ethic in what we did you know we had a kind of different mix going on so there were a lot of different kinds of ways of doing that.

I suppose at the same time there was also the London filmmakers co-op which is where most of the story gets written in most of the history is written around the London Filmmakers co-op and the kinds of work that was going on at the London filmmakers co-op and they didn't really do video very much, they thought it was the work of the devil essentially.

So there was some crossover too between that community and our community. For instance Derek Jarman came down to the Oval to buy some footage from us that we had of the Lewisham riots because Nick was at the Lewisham riots when that happened and he wanted some footage when he was working with Marianne Faithfull to begin with on her first video pop promo. So there's some fit footage that Nick shot of the Lewisham riot in Marianne Faithfull's first video promo that she made with Derek Jarman and so Derek was from that kind of film experimental film world. So there was a little bit of cross over between that and the community video world though not much actually because we sort of spoke a slightly different language. There were there were sort of in next door rooms if you like. You know, we knew they were there and they knew we were there. We crossed over if we needed something but our mission was slightly different I think.

Funding as Community Arts

So we were very much put into the Community Art banner and the Community Art movement. And and and were and it had hardly any other connection with filmmakers at one level, in one sense.

We couldn't get access to film funds or film subsidy if we wanted to apply for instance to what was then called Greater London Arts Association. We had to go under the Community Arts banner. We weren't allowed to go under the film banner because we weren't 'proper filmmakers' and 'proper filmmakers' were mainly, there was an artists led film movement for public subsidy in the seventies. So um and the artists didn't really understand or relate very much to what we were doing. So I can remember actually going to a demonstration in St. James' Park which was outside where the Arts Council used to have their headquarters to support Community Arts and all the community video makers and the collective were there with our banners

Video Broadcast and TV

Broadcasters had no relationship with that form of video whatsoever unless you got some footage that they wanted. Broadcasters position was that. We can't have a relationship with this form of video because the technology is not good enough the picture quality and the resolution is so poor we can't possibly broadcast it. But then of course every time you got some footage that they wanted, that position was overturned because they would just put it out, they would just bash it up to one inch and put it out and put a put a caption on saying you know this is out this is poor quality because it came from here.

So there was a certain sense of that we had of exclusion from those kinds of worlds those existing worlds of moving image media. On the one hand broadcast on the other hand cinema. That began to change as the equipment got better, as the tech quality got better and as the language and the culture got better and we began to understand what we're doing more.

The Birth of Channel Four

There was of course um a great deal of lobbying that went on through the back end of the '70s and the early 1980s around for instance the Peacock Report and the idea that there should be a fourth channel and what that fourth channel should be for in British Television and the Independent Filmmakers Association which was a group that had been formed in the 1970s as a kind of um you know post '68 radical film movement was very heavily involved in that lobbying around what Channel 4 should become and around the time that the Independent Film Association and the workshop agreement got formulated um there was... video was then included in the IFA. So the IFA because the IFVA the Independent Film and Video Makers Association so video got included.

So actually Channel 4 kind of made it possible for the film makers and the video makers to start to talk to each other in a way that was interesting. And the workshop movement kind of marked a step whereby some of those formal distinctions and technological distinctions began to be broken down. So you would have workshops who worked in film and video and ex... and began to exchange them a bit more and began to see them as being interchangeable. And in fact of course what happened very quickly was the video completely took over because film was far too expensive, video was really cheap, it was accessible, it was acceptable to broadcasters. So very quickly in the workshop movement as such from 83/4/5/6 everyone was shooting on video and film disappeared almost entirely as a medium in a in a in those times.

From Community Video to Scratch Video

I think the time that I spent working in Community Video around those early years in the 1980s was absolutely constitutive for me and formative for me and really influential for me. The idea fundamentally that a mediated world is a site of political and cultural importance and that as many people as possible should be given access to that mediated world is really really fundamental to everything I've done ever since. To all of my work. So I'd say it was incredibly formative. I mean I think I went into it with some hazy notions and came out of it with a bit of a manifesto and a sense of sense of a praxis that I could carry forward.

[I] got involved in much more radical video art work and was part of... formed a whole new wave of people around the idea of scratch video. But that was deeply technologically informed by the notion of video and by the aesthetic of video and by what video was about as a technological form. So I mean I think that early experience of actually having to deal hands on with this equipment and with signals and with sync pulses and with the idea of electronic images and that as a, that as being the my technological matter, and the form that I work with that was very very important in that moment of scratch video and thinking about the aesthetics of scratch and what it could do in video what technology could do. And then also what you could do with that politically because that allowed me to unlock some some voices into the public sphere in a way that actually, nobody had done quite before because we were able to take video and make people say things that they hadn't ever said and do things that they hadn't ever done and we were allowed to use video editing as this form of manipulation and politics and political art in a way that nobody had done before. And we were able to get it on television which was ridiculous and amazing and fantastic.

From Scratch Video to Academia

I also think that one of the things that happened to me as I became an academic sort of from the mid '90s on and started to think about the impact of digital. I was still thinking about access, I was still thinking about who gets to speak. What voices are being empowered? What voices are being mobilised here? Who gets to have a voice? How does technology impact upon what it is that people are able to say? What's the role of technology?

And if I was able to um try to compress all of my academic research interests I mean really I'm interested in the relationship between technology and cultural form. That's what, that's my academic track. I wouldn't be interested in technology and its relationship to cultural form if I hadn't fallen in to Community Video in 1979 and picked this new technology and been at the cutting edge of new technology in 1979 and continued then to be interested in what's happening with video, what's happening with digital, what's a CD Rom, what's a web server, oh my god there's this thing called email. All the way through I've been really interested in technology and what technology enables people to do and I think that comes from that and being immersed in that world um so I think it was very important to me yeah.