

**Sue Hall**  
**Edited LCVA interview**  
**Interviewer: Heinz Nigg**

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## **The Squatters Tapes**

**Portrait of Sue Hall**  
**Born 1948 in Reading**  
**Lives and works in London**  
**Co-founder of Fantasy Factory**

I grew up in a place called Reading, which is about 40 miles to the west of London, now down the M4, though the M4 didn't exist when I was a child. There was never anything to do in Reading, because anybody who was grown up would go to London. You wanted to go out, you've got the train to London. But of course, for children, for young teenagers, that was not possible. So Reading was like a dormitory city in a way, in those days.

### **Vienna**

My parents both came from Vienna. They were Jews – they fled from Hitler. My father was a doctor, but he was also a Jew, and a member, a registered member of the Communist Party of Vienna. So the day the Anschluss happened, he left Vienna with his passport and his backpack, and he left over the mountains to Switzerland and came here. My mother was not politically oriented in any way, and did not know what was going to happen. And she came out later, in 1939.

### **My grandparents**

They were all murdered by the Nazis – they were in Vienna, my grandparents, they were all killed. When you're a child, you accept what is, and you know, it's like that, yes OK, I didn't ask anymore.

### **A vision of Kathmandu**

When I was five, Sir Edmond Hilary climbed Everest, and I can remember getting up in the morning and finding the Times, which was one of the newspapers my parents read, on the doormat. There were colour photographs of the trek to Everest, through the subtropical rainforest, and I looked at that and I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I announced to anybody who would listen - the neighbours, my parents etc. – 'I'm going to go to Kathmandu when I'm grown up'.

### **Test tubes and a bunsen**

And I did much better by myself. I studied chemistry from the age of 8 – my father bought me a book, and a bunch of chemicals, and a Bunsen burner, and some test-tubes and stuff. Then a bit later there was geology. The university had a geological club or society, and I asked if I could join them, and they said yes. So I was the mascot, the 10 year old mascot – they would take me on field trips. I had the most wonderful time digging up fossils, and taking them to the museum.

## **Learning how to argue**

My father was an atheist, and my mother didn't really know what to think – she wasn't sure. But my father was culturally Jewish, and he would have his friends over on Saturday mornings, Saturday afternoons. And they would argue about politics, because Jews argue, that's the discipline. Rather like the Buddhists, you know, you test your point of view by getting somebody as clever, or cleverer, than you, to try and take it to bits.

## **Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament**

In my early teens, I joined YCND, which was Youth CND, which you can join, in those days, from the age of 13. And it was quite interesting, there was, you know, highly seditious things like sell Peace News on the library steps. It was not a militant organization of any kind.

## **The Cuba crisis**

The reason that it made such an impression on me, was it was the first time in my life that the adults around me were frightened – my mother and father were frightened, they were really frightened, their friends were frightened, everyone was frightened. We thought we might be dead tomorrow, no-one knew what was going to happen. Were they going to let these nukes off? It was a very real threat. It could easily have happened. And I had never seen all these adults so frightened before, so it made a very big impression on me, aged 14. And that's when I turned away, really, from politics. Because I thought there's nothing I can do, the peace movement has no effect at all on any of this.

## **I turn to music and clubbing**

I was a teenager by then, and I was full of angst and anguish, and I found the blues absolutely perfect for that, and the rhythm and blues was the blues you could dance to. Get the train to London, and we used to go mob-handed and jump over the ticket barriers and let them chase us. Nobody ever paid. And it was the first time I mixed with people of other ethnicities, and I thought it was so exciting. I absolutely loved the Jamaicans! It wasn't like, there is a dance. It was, that was where I learnt about improvisation. And stringing the moves together as you feel like, in your own head, rather than according to some preordained ritual.

## **The Beat poets at Albert Hall**

So I'd seen all these people, 5000 of them at the Albert Hall at this beat poetry reading. And this was the first time we'd looked round and said, wow, there are other people like me in the world. But I didn't know where they'd come from, you know, I'd gone with my boyfriend, we were there, we didn't really meet anybody, and then we went back to Reading.

## **Dropping out and wanting to go to Nepal**

I didn't want to study, and I left college and I found a room to rent in a friend's house in London. Then I found various ways to maintain myself – buying and selling in the markets, Portobello Road and so on. The people were interesting – the work was not interesting. But I wanted to go to Nepal, and I was trying to save money.

## **Four years of travelling**

Well the things that were important to me was the understanding that there wasn't just a single culture. That it wasn't true, what I'd been told here in school, or by older people here, that this is the way to do it. There wasn't any way to do it, there were a lot of different ways.

For me, travelling was instead of university, it was a way to educate myself about other people and their situations and how they saw things. And I'd done that.

## **Back in London**

### **Squatting in the early 70's**

Squats were available. There wasn't much money available – there was a big recession like now, but different. A lot of unemployment amongst young people – it was hard to find a job. So I ended up in this huge squatting community. Because all my friends...one of them said I'll crack a house for you, and I found some other people to share the house. And in, I don't know, August 1972, I moved into my squat.

And I started an organization called Graft On, which was the name of the ward, the electoral ward, where I lived. And of course since it was mainly squatted that meant a lot of interaction with the other squatters. And it turned out the council had a plan to demolish all these houses. They'd already emptied out the former residents, and sent them to live in...Lewisham where they didn't know anybody, and couldn't get any work. We had a 2 year long battle with the council, we fought two public enquiries, we got a lot of support from other people in the area who had Tenants Associations, I started a Residents Association. We were squatters because squatters couldn't call themselves tenants, but we were residents. We were supported by the Victorian Society, and people like that. This is very close to Hampstead. We had a surprising amount of support from these kind of people, which I wasn't expecting.

## **Introduction to video by John Hoppy Hopkins**

So while I was doing this Hoppy approached me, and he said, what about making a video - Forming a Residents Association. So I said, yeah, great, it would be very interesting, to see how it works. So that was my introduction to video. And as soon as I saw the video I was far more interested in that than in the community work. And it was quite clear that I was not suitable for community politics. But I was a pretty good technician, and I could plan and make video programmes. I liked the interaction of the technology with the culture. And these were both areas I could work in and be good at.

There was no editing – we had to edit in camera for the next, I don't know, 8 or 9 months, on half-inch open reel. At that time, 1973, there wasn't any editing.

## **Participant observation**

Well first of all we were living in this very large squatting community, which was unique, there had never been anything quite like it. So things were happening all the time. We didn't have to go anywhere or do anything special. We just had to hang out with our friends, and suddenly something interesting would start happening. The point was, this was participant observation, to put it in a technical way. We were squatters ourselves, we were not from the outside. And at first people were very hesitant about the video, and we took it out and let other people handle it a lot, we showed them, this is what you do, this is

how you zoom, this is how your focus. And then we'd erase it, we'd re-use tapes, which were very expensive in those days. But after people had had a go themselves, they felt reassured. They didn't see it as dangerous, or outside, or any of those things. And that was quite crucial. And we videoed occupations, parties, evictions, street actions, lectures, seminars...marches. I think that just about covers it.

We showed it back to the squatters, and also squatters in other parts of London. And then gradually, gradually, other people started to be interested. And we broadened the work, the scope of the work we were doing.

### **October 1974, a letter from the BFI**

Hoppy came in and said he'd got a letter from the British Film Institute. I think it was actually from the Production Board. They wanted to spend some money on video equipment for quote 'community and arts groups'. There weren't very many people to spend it on in those days. And I was very surprised - it never occurred to me anyone would want to give me any money, and I didn't think what I was doing was art - I thought it was life.

And I pointed out to him that if we could combine his organization and mine, then we could ask for twice as much, and that would be enough, between us, to get an edit desk, which had just come out, the...3670, Andy may remember...the Sony 3670 half-inch open reel so-called edit deck, with which you could do stopwatch editing. And that we would make it available to other groups in the organizations, 30% of the time. And this turned out to be an absolute winner - they gave us all the money we asked for. We thought really we should have asked for more! Then we did something that nobody else thought of doing for a long time. Instead of just dumping the stuff on a desk, we actually built a console. And we put the equipment in a planned ergonomic way into the console, and we got the eyelines right for the monitors, and it was a sort of edit suite, and so people had to bring their own portapacks, in order for it to work. You know, we'd got an audio mixer, we'd got some monitors, we'd got an edit VTR, but they still had to bring their portable VTR as the source. And anyway, since they were all adjusted differently with the skew and the tracking in those days it wasn't standard, it was probably just as well to playback on the stuff you'd shot the stuff on. So we put out a press release and opened up, and we were absolutely inundated from day one! 30% of the time - I don't think I actually shot anything after that, or only at the weekend!

And it was not only artists and community groups - in the first, I don't know, month we were open we also had work from Schroeder's Chemicals and National Westminster Bank.

### **Our three rates policy**

We took a look at running what we called a video resource centre, or video access centre, from that point of view, and we wrote a pitch about that, about how to enable communication by disenfranchised social groups. And one of the ways we differentiated between our clients was to have a tiered rate structure. So for the artists and community groups - this was in our squat, the very first Fantasy Factory - it was £2 an hour. But if you were a commercial organization, it was £10 an hour. And if you came from an educationally supported group it was £4 an hour.

### **Assemble editing and replaying tapes**

You have to remember, we're talking about assemble editing. That means you can only bolt chunks of stuff together. With a stopwatch you can only get to within, I don't know, a quarter of a second, maybe a bit less sometimes. So the editing isn't like what we call

editing today, it's just really bolting chunks of stuff together in an assembled fashion. I mean, in order to show videos in those days. You have to remember, this is before VHS. People didn't have anything to playback videos at home. You had to take the equipment with you, or you had to send it to somebody who had the same equipment you had.

It was a big deal. You went to a room somewhere, you took the equipment, you set it up, you hoped it would work, you did a test beforehand. Often if you tried to show it on an ordinary television and you didn't take a monitor it didn't work, because the televisions had a very hard lock, and the signal was not time base corrected. I mean it was a very steep learning curve. Some of the playbacks we did, we couldn't get the tape to play. But, you know, that only happened once. And then I knew that if I really wanted to play it, I had to take a monitor with me, just in case, whatever the people said they'd got, or hadn't got.

### **Impact on the squatter community: raising their profile**

That was the main effect – people were impressed by video then in a way they wouldn't be now. Oh, there's some video, we'll show it on the telly – that sort of thing.

### **Making a living**

It was possible to live on very little. And a lot of people were on benefits, social security. I wasn't. I used to buy and sell in the markets, to make a bit of money. But none of us had any money, I mean it was very difficult to make money at that time. Previously in the '60s, you'd always known someone with a good job who was making loads of money, who'd keep a whole flat full of people on one salary, no problem. By this time, 73, 74, 75, that was long gone. Everyone was broke, who I knew. And then we started getting arts grants, and officially you couldn't get paid. But, of course, actually you could write a bit of padding in, and get paid.

### **Founding Fantasy Factory with John "Hoppy" Hopkins**

Fantasy Factory was named after a track on a Stevie Winwood Traffic album, called Shoot Out of the Fantasy Factory, that Hoppy and I happened to like at the time we were starting the company.

The forming of Fantasy Factory really was a bridge between squatting and the rest of the world. Because as soon as we were running a facility, we were much more restricted in the shooting we could do ourselves because there was so much demand, and, you know, we wanted to meet the demand, that's how we were earning our money. And suddenly the money was pouring in, even from the artists, and we always had a roughly equal mix of work, I mean, we didn't plan it like that, but there was demand from the education sector who paid more, there was demand from the commercial sector, who paid a lot more, and there was demand from the artists and community groups, who paid the least. But they all paid. Because when we tried to do it for nothing, we were treated with great disrespect – people didn't value our time, they didn't tell us if they weren't going to come, a lot of time was wasted.

Hoppy and I had very different skill sets and that was one of the good things about working together. I could do a lot of things he wasn't very good at and he could do loads of things I couldn't do.

## **Learning from the commercial sector**

They were the people who were making the slick movies and TV programmes, and I learned a hell of a lot how to edit from those people, and applied the techniques and knowledge to the editing I did, the teaching I did for the artists and the community groups. In that way everybody benefitted from the mix of creative styles and input. The combination of work was what was interesting – the fact that it was completely different every day, and you could never tell what was going to walk through the door next. We had a most enormous effect, but that was partly because video was growing up like mushrooms all around us. You know, when we started off there was no access to editing – we were unique in what we did. People would come from Edinburgh to use our facility – arts groups, you know they'd book up and come to London especially for a week, just to be there editing. And from all over the country.

When we started almost nobody understood what video was – what is video? What is it, how does it affect us? What can we do if we make a film or video about our project? Nobody knew anything about that. By the end, everybody knew they needed to have a video about their project, whoever they were, and they expected to be able to do it. And it was that expectation that we'd helped to create, and that was what we wanted to do. We wanted to even up the playing field between people like the BBC, which is the mouthpiece of governments, and what ordinary people thought. We wanted to give voice to their views without the intervention of the broadcasters.

### **The squatters tapes: Our heritage**

The list is mainly unedited tapes, shot with the squatters, in the three years 1973 to '76 or was it '72 to '75, there's a bit of overlap, with some stuff in '78 which is squatting in other districts.

You will see people talking about it, and you see people occupying the Social Services Department when they tried to evict families from their squats, you will see is occupying the Housing Director's offices at the Town Hall. It shows a completely different set of social attitudes, both with the squatters trying to develop a new way of looking at society. But also how the authorities perceived what was happening not as a threat. Not that they were pleased about it or happy about it but the way they handled it was incredibly gentle and its important today that people should see that.

All over the global village people will be interested in aspects of this work I mean I think the most important thing is that it was all self organised with very little money and therefore its something that can be applied anywhere if people are interested.