

Tony Downmunt
Edited LCVA interview
Interviewer: Heinz Nigg
Transcribed by Ieuan Franklin

Channels of Resistance

Portrait of of Tony Downmunt
Born 1951, Sussex (UK)
Professor – Goldsmiths, University of London
Community Video Activist

I was born in Sussex, in a little village called Newick. My father was Polish, he was a Polish airman and he was, he came to this country in 1939, at the start of the war - eventually to join the Polish Air Force here. My mother was kind of, I'd guess I'd describe her as upper-class English...and they met after the war, because she was involved in the air-force because one her uncles was...he was very high up in the RAF, anyway. And my father was involved in Polish Air Force Association business, so they met through that. He was a mushroom farmer; he cultivated mushrooms on land that my mother had inherited.

He was an agricultural economist in Poland...the opportunities for university educated Poles in England in the '40s were not great, so he re-trained as a mushroom farmer.

I was born in the house that my mother inherited, and which he created this mushroom farm around.

Home

In some ways ... kind of, sort of idyllic even. The garden, the house was enormous...I had a very strong sense of kind of freedom, in terms of being able to wander around a lot, and we had dogs, and I loved the dogs. So in lots of ways it was really nice. I think my mother was quite a troubled person, and she was um for a time I think early on in my childhood she was seeing a psychiatrist, and I think she had a form of nervous breakdown quite early in my childhood. So it wasn't, it was contradictory in some ways. And I was also sent away to school when I was 9, to boarding school, so that in some way was a sort of rupture with my life up to that point.

A distanced father, but a secure existence

He seemed always very remote from the family, from *me* anyway, I think less so from my sister. And so, and I found him quite, in a way, quite intimidating, he was quite a distant presence. That all changed very much later in my life, but I wasn't close to him at all.

The things that I remember as being really positive about my childhood aren't really to do with my parenting, although maybe slightly to do with my...in a way it was quite a secure home, and it was relatively prosperous, so at a kind of material level it was

great. And the sense of space in the house and in the garden around the house was fantastic. I mean that, I still think I have that um...I've moved back to the same area I was brought up in, and I think that's a lot to do with geography and the feeling of space, in a way.

Alienated from my social background

In terms of how I feel about my background socially is that, I spent years and years, in some ways it's still with me, feeling kind of alienated from the class that I was born into, and the kind of assumptions about the world that came with that class. And, modified to some extent by having a foreign Dad, but still having a sense that I was born into a class whose assumptions I didn't like and I've always felt, even before I understood about class, you know I always felt uncomfortable with my mother's attitudes to people who she thought were 'common', or from lower orders, there was that sense of kind of...But for me the people who worked for my Dad, who worked on the mushroom farm, were always much nicer to me than my mother and father's friends, in a way, you know, so I felt the injustice of that I felt strongly as a kid.

And I went to a school called Lewes Grammar School, which was a sort of paying day-school between 8 and 9, I don't remember very much about that, apart from the fact that my mother got extremely alarmed 'cos she said I was getting a 'common' accent because I went to this place. Apparently my Os, I've never been able to pronounce my O's properly since I went to that school, she used to say.

My life at boarding schools

Film and identity

I was at the same school from nine until thirteen and then another school from fourteen to seventeen.

The first school I went to was actually, really formed me creatively, so I have very good memories of that. I decided that I wanted to be a filmmaker there, and made...There was a teacher there who was [an] extremely talented guy, who energized a lot of us into being interested in film and sound recording and creativity. So I wrote audio plays and we had a sort of audio, radio thing that we used to get played to the whole school.

By the time I was 13 we made a, myself and this teacher made this kind of film, semi-sort of-autobiographical home movie type film, at the end of my time in that school. It was about me as a sort of dissident boy scout - badly dressed, rebelling, falling in love with this sheep. And this sheep was this symbol, in a way, of difference, and something that I was kind of reaching for - that makes it sound very serious, when now it's very funny to look at. But I guess for me, creativity was a vehicle for carving out an imaginative space for myself and projecting myself into it.

At public school – 1964-68

Particularly the second school I went to, which was very different, which I hated, in a way I didn't the first public school I went to. It was very stratified – very literally, because there was a house for people who were day-pupils rather than boarders. And we were all very conscious that the day-pupils were from different from the

boarders. And it was also a factory for producing young men who were going to be conformist and...who originally were going to be colonial administrators, and now were moving into finance or law or whatever.

Because I was there in '67, '68. I think I left in the end of '67, but there was already that sense of ferment in the outside world, which was reflected in the school, and there were a number of us who were quite rebellious...rebelled both against their hierarchy in the school, and also implicitly were rebelling against the surrounding society in a way.

Studying English Literature in Oxford

Hanging out with American draft dodgers

They were aware in the school that I was becoming very disenchanted and alienated, so they put me in for Oxford entry – trying to get into Oxford - when I was very young, I was 17 or something. And I managed to get a place.

So I again felt scared and young a lot of the time. I hung out with...I did find a way through it by hanging out with American draft-dodgers basically, which is, happened to be where I ended up living, in a house full of American draft-dodgers. And that was very formative for me politically, and, in a way, it was where I learned to smoke dope, and it was kind of...the politics of the '60s were very present, this is like '69, so you know the Vietnam War was still going, they were in England to avoid all that.

Pursuing my interest in film

I really pursued interests in film, there, a lot. So I was part of the...we used to meet in the Museum of Modern Art in the basement in Oxford, and sort of lie around on dank old mouldy mattresses watching Andy Warhol films, all of that was really formative. And I remember there was a Godard festival there, and I saw something like 14 Godard films in 2 days, you know. I mean, I always knew that I wanted to be a filmmaker, really, so Oxford was a bit of a deviation...so I applied to film school at the end of my time in Oxford, and got in, with all of these ideas about Godard and politics and all that.

1972: A two year course

at a film school in Guilford

It was very traditional, in a way, it was very industry-oriented...they made it absolutely clear that they weren't about 'creativity', or messing about, wasting your time. It was vocational, and traditional, you were supposed to get jobs at the end of it. All of that I found really alienating; it wasn't what I was going there for at all.

And you know I was there because, in a sense, I was this maniac Godard fan from Oxford. So I had lots of really intellectual ideas about film and about particularly I'd started to think about representation, which is obviously what Godard's work particularly at that time, was all about: representation and who gets to represent what, and the politics of all of that.

And...I also felt actually intimidated and alienated by film itself, the kind of business that we learnt of loading a 16mm roll in a bag and kind of, what can go wrong with film...

George Stoney and the mirror machine

A crash course in community video

Half-way through my time at film school, I read an article in Sight and Sound called 'The Mirror Machine' by George Stoney, and it was about the use of portable video, particularly in the States and Canada, and what portable video offered. And...it kind of immediately was, spoke to me as something that was a concrete alternative, both technically as video, and in terms of working techniques, to professional 16mm film, or professional television studio work.

Myself and a colleague from the, another student from the film school decided to go to visit George Stoney and uh video groups in the States, and the Challenge for Change programme in Canada, as a way of understanding this work, trying to figure out what was going on...I think it was probably about a month, we hung around in New York with alternative video groups, chatted to George Stoney at the Alternate Media Centre where he was at the time, spent a week with Videofreex, who were a kind of...group, fantastic group who lived in Maple Tree Farm in upstate New York, went up there from, to Montreal, and hung out at the Challenge for Change in the videotheque in Montreal, so, it was a crash course in basically, community video or alternative video. And one of the characteristics at that time, of course, was that there wasn't as mass...people who were into the video, particularly in the States, where like Videofreex ran a community cable station, but they also had video artists as part of a commune who were doing far out stuff with video art, so there wasn't a separation [between community video and video art]. That was, in a sense, the beginning of my working life, seriously - that I thought, this is what I want to be doing.

What I learned from community video in North America

...the 2 things that occur immediately. One is that it is just the idea of accessibility, that the Portapak is something that anybody can pick up and use. And the link between that and politics, in the sense that uh, you know, most people are excluded from being able to represent themselves, so the Portapak is a way of redressing that balance. I think that...certainly Maple Tree farm and the Videofreex and the work they were doing - they had a kind of community cable TV station in Maple Tree Farm, which was tiny village actually, it was a few hundred people I think - but that experience of being around when they were making programmes for that cable station, was really exciting.

Back in the UK: Finishing my film course and buying my first video portapak. Meeting Su Braden

We I had another year in Guilford 'fighting the man' in the art school! Produced what one of the tutors described as the worst television programme he'd ever seen in his life. It probably is pretty bad, I've not got a copy of it...It was a sort of Godardian pan up and down of a row of television monitors, with various things playing on it, which was supposed to be a kind of critique of the media in the present...That was played in. we played that in the 1975 Serpentine Video Exhibition, so that was, everybody

played everything in that, so it's not a massive distinction but... And then, after I left the school, I did apply for a few straight jobs. I think I even applied for something in the BBC, but didn't get anything, and in a way...my heart certainly wasn't in it. So I spent a few months working in William Whiteley's Department Store in Queensway, with a view to getting enough money to buy a Portapak. So I basically knew that what I wanted to do was working with portable video, so my strategy was to buy a Portapak and...I can't remember how, but I met Su Braden, who was starting this video project on the Aylesbury Estate in South East London, but she didn't have any video gear, and by that time I'd got the Portapak. So we teamed up and started working on the Aylesbury Estate.

Aylesbury Estate, South East London - Bedrock of a social and community revolution?

...I ended up working more with young people than I did anything else. I had, I went, we had lots of ideas about community arts on this estate – it was a community arts project, not just a video project – and the fundamental sort of rationale of the project was that we were going to occupy spaces on the estate, which we'd got council permission to do, which were originally designed as possible places where people would have laundrettes, or community spaces. But none of them were used, so we said 'well, OK, we'll go in there and we'll start opening them up and using them'. And our, certainly my original conception of the project was that what would happen would be that suddenly everyone on the estate, all elements of the community would start coming to these places, and it would be the bedrock of a kind of social and community revolution, that it would start almost like autonomous free zones, in each of these blocks of the estate, because Aylesbury was 12 thousand people at that time, it was an enormous estate. Actually what happened was that when you opened a room, was that any kids from the block would kind of turn up straight away to see what was going on. So we, the work that I ended up feeling like I was doing there wasn't community organizing particularly, it was youth work really, youth play/work with kids, using video.

Video with young people

The first thing is really about seeing yourself on TV...in fact I interviewed one of the group that I worked with most consistently in the late '70s and that was the thing that the dominant kid in the group said, was that 'I came in here and when I saw myself on video for the first time, it was like wow!' A real kind of energy, energizing effect from that, seeing yourself on video for the first time.

...it was basically on a weekly basis – and they would come and do something each week. Sometimes which was rubbish or...just passing the time, but sometimes was extraordinarily kind of powerful in a way that, as a group process, so the one evening I remember most distinctly was, it was 2 or 3 months after one of the young people's Dad had died. And this kid came in and structured this whole drama around the idea of his having a guardian angel, and it was saturated with his recent experience of bereavement and stuff. But it wasn't explicitly about that at all, but it was clear that what he was doing was using that process of coming in, devising a quick video, shooting it, playing it back, all within 2 hours, that was about that group process and how he was using that group process. So that I thought was really interesting...

We did a whole project that involved them making a kind of mock 'Star Trek'...they dressed themselves in uniforms made out of bin bags, it had model work in front of star-scapes, little models...It was following a television formula in a way, the Star Trek formula. So that one of the absurd expectations I had is that the work that we did with young people, or older people, or whatever, would bust TV conventions, we would sort of create a new televisual language through giving people access to video equipment. Which, that was one of my ideals, which for me...resided much more in the spontaneous work that we did...

The Association of Video Workers - John Hoppy Hopkins

I was very involved politically in the various organizations that were, you know, around collective organization of London video workers, so I went, one of the results of my meeting George Stoney was that he said you should go and see this guy Hoppy. So of course we went round to Chalk Farm to meet Hoppy. And Hoppy was running the Association of London Independent Video Groups at the time (ALIV), and he was bored with it, so he just gave us the books and said here you go, can you go away and run this now- in his classic kind of way...So we did that, and then that turned into the Association of Video Workers. So I was doing a lot of that.

Writing up my video experience with young people - From process to product - I join Albany Video

By the end of the '70s I was very...I'm not sure if disillusioned is quite the right word, but I was in some senses kind of dissatisfied with, because I'd had all these ideas that community video was really, should be really socially transformative, and should be revolutionary, people should be creating new stuff, and they should be critiquing the society more explicitly and all that - and all I was doing was hanging around kids and having a good time. I felt there was a mismatch between my ideals for the work, and what was happening. So I wrote a book which was about using video with young people...to summarize that experience, and in some ways as a way of closing that chapter of that work that I did. And went to work in Albany Video, which had been going for a while by the time I joined it.

But ...the other strand of that history, was the running argument between people who thought that the process of video was the most significant, if not the only significant aspect of video – so the idea of a group making a video, the value of that was all about what happened in that process, which is in a sense what I was doing with kids. And the idea, which was much more my idea in a sense, because I'd come from film school, of it being about producing different kinds of work and kinds of representation. That was a real ideological struggle in a way, between the various different parts of the community video movement. I think I felt that I was much more on the side of the filmmaking, in a way, than I was in sort of process, per se, although I've always thought that process is a very integral part of the whole thing. But not the end point, necessarily.

In retrospect – I'm not sure I felt this at the time – I think I became...I wanted to move in the direction more of production, and of producing stuff, rather than just process. And Albany Video was, before I joined, already at the forefront of that movement, through tapes like August 13th or Us Girls, which both had some wide distribution across the country, it was very difficult, but they both had a national significance as videos.

Becoming a franchised workshop - Channel 4 - The Vision of Alan Fountain

Funding from the GLC (Greater London Council)

Within a couple of years of my starting at Albany, Channel 4 had started and things really did change, in the sense that Channel 4 became what a lot of thought of as being the venue or the distribution media for community...generated media and that was certainly how Alan Fountain, I think, saw it as well, up to a point. So a lot of my energy then went into becoming a franchised workshop, and making tapes that were designed for, to some extent, designed for transmission on Channel 4.

I think it was contradictory, because there were 2 major factors that really boosted the scene in London. One was Channel 4, and the other was the GLC, who were also around 'til '85, and at Albany Video we got funding from them as well as Channel 4. So the early '80s were definitely, perhaps the best resourced time for community-based media. But it was also, you know, like '82 with the Falklands and the re-election of Thatcher later, and the society outside of the community video field, and outside of the GLC and Channel 4, was clearly becoming hostile to community projects of any kind, and that sort of community politics. So it was contradictory I think...so I can remember myself being very aware that the political ground was shifting under us, even though we were in some senses better resourced.

How we cooperated with Channel 4 - Beyond our Ken

The first contact with Channel 4 was that Alan Fountain came round to all the workshops, including Albany, and said 'I'm interested in working with you, do you want to apply for some equipment? So you can could buy colour equipment?' and so we did that, unsurprisingly, and we got the U-matic gear and colour cameras and stuff out of that. Um, that was just a one-off grant. We then subsequently applied to be a franchised workshop, and were successful in that. And I think we held our franchise for about 3 years, possibly 2, maybe 4, but for a very specific chunk of time.

We made a number of videos in that period, including the one that I was most involved in, with Andy Porter, was Beyond Our Ken, which was a protest video in a sense, which was shown on TV, about the abolition of the GLC.

I think it was about a dozen community groups who'd all received funding from the Channel 4 [GLC], all of them based in Lewisham and Greenwich, saying from their point of view, why the GLC shouldn't be abolished, because it supported the kind of grassroots work that they were involved in. So It was a kind of, it was a sort of video that could have been made 5, 10 years earlier, as a sort of local grassroots campaign tape against the abolition of the GLC, but in this case it was made for C4, to argue that case nationally. So it did get some national exposure, and C4 had to, they were summoned to Right to Reply as often happened with the more left-wing C4 programmes, and they had to justify why they put money into this Lefty propaganda, kind of thing.

Other locally based productions for Channel 4 - We lose our franchise - Being White - Albany Video Distribution

Karen Alexander made a video with young black women, called Mstaken Identity, which I think was shown on C4, pretty sure it was, and there was another programme made by another young black woman called Carol Jacobs, which was about the local reggae scene, that was also on C4. So we made a number of programmes that were locally based...but became...shown on C4.

You had to get your workshop franchise renewed every year, and they, C4 were in a position where they didn't have enough money to go round to fund new groups, particularly black workshops and workshops in Northern Ireland. It became clear that they wanted to move on from us and they did...which I quite understood the reasons for that, and it seemed, we sort of vaguely expected it. Also we were involved with, the other thing that I made during the franchise period, or was partly responsible for making, was a video called Being White, which was a racism-awareness, anti-racist tape for use in community groups, about issues of race and whiteness, which there wasn't any public discussion about that, at that time. It was a very simple kind of uh mostly talking heads video that nevertheless set out the issues very clearly. And uh Channel 4 didn't want to show it, as was their right under the Workshops Agreement – we made stuff and offered it to them, and if they didn't want it they didn't take it. A lot of my energy had got into that, just before we lost the franchise...which for me was fine, it wasn't a tape that was designed for broadcast, it was designed for community education in a sense, and was very successful at that, and I think in some senses is still used in racism-awareness work, but was certainly used extensively for a long time after we made it - as part of what we did at Albany Video in distribution, 'cos we were, as well as being involved in production, we were also a distribution agency, so we distributed our own videos but we also acquired videos from all over the country, and internationally, that had a kind of use value in local community work.

The Miners' strike 1984-85 - A highlight of nationwide video campaigning

I think the Miners' Campaign Tapes that came out of a lot of the workshops, not necessarily community video worksops. but all of the workshops that were funded out of the workshops agreement, or before that, that was an extraordinary phenomenon...because it was the 1984 Miners' Strike when the mainstream media was uniformly, almost uniformly, apart from C4, critical and very selective in what they showed of the miners' struggle, and particularly, always shot from behind police lines...and all that sort of stuff. So The Miner's Campaign Tapes, of which there were...4 or 6, all of us in the workshops contributed in differing degrees to sending footage in, and they were edited together. And there were tens of thousands of videos, VHS videos circulating in mining communities, of those campaign tapes. I think that's, in a sense, it comes right at the end of the period of "community video" per se.

International exchange - Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA)

My main contact has been with Australia, and in particular aboriginal media in Australia. That was an extraordinary story, because in the mid-80s - there was kind of community video work going on in aboriginal communities I think from the late '70s

onwards - but that culminated in the mid-80s in an organization called the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), applying for the licence for satellite broadcasting in Central Australia which they, much to their surprise, won. And that was a, for me at the time, this was in the mid-80s, it, things were basically post-85 the GLC was finished, we'd lost our C4 franchise, you know, it was a big period of re-evaluation in a sense. And I thought, in a sense it was like what they'd done, for me, was an example of...something really interesting that a community group could do, in a sense taking power of a local satellite broadcasting system. As it turned out, it was a much more contradictory and weird story. But I became interested in that and ended up making a programme, with CAAMA about all of those issues.

That was on Channel 4 in the early '90s, so it was a C4-financed programme.

Setting up our own company – APT - Remote Control, Channels of Resistance, Tactical TV

The main chunk of work that Andy Porter and I did as part of APT, which was the company, was a series of programmes about television, so in a way they were about the kind of work that we'd been involved in. The first one was called Remote Control, and was an argument about the Broadcasting Bill that was in front of Parliament in 1989 I think – my dates might be wrong – but it argued for a particular kind of community production of the kind we'd been involved in for the last 15 years really, and against the provisions of the new Broadcasting Bill. I don't think it had a massive political effect, but it was a kind of summary of arguments at that time. And then we carried on, making a series for C4 called Channels of Resistance, which...again was all about world television, but instances of local and community resistance to mainstream television models. So we made 2 programmes within that, one of them was the Australian aboriginal programme, the other one was Tactical TV, which was a summary of a conference in Amsterdam in the early '90s, which was, which brought together people who were into radical media experiments from all over the world. And we kind of summarized a lot of those in that programme. And then there were a lot of other bought-in programmes that we weren't to do with making but we bought in and packaged as this Channels of Resistance series. Which was quite well...publicised at the time, and was used quite extensively in education since, and I edited a book of essays that came out of a lot of those programmes as well.

After the Channels of Resistance experience, which was a real high, because it was, you know we could make interesting stuff and get it on TV, the work at C4 for me started to dry up, so that Alan Fountain eventually moved on, the people who took over from him were less politically in sympathy with the sorts of things I was doing... For a long time we did, within APT, a lot of work that was always very badly-funded but was very interesting – to do with working with new filmmakers. So we made a lot...of 3 minute programmes for slots after the news, which were very good fun to make, and...enabled us to carry on the sort of work of nurturing younger filmmakers and getting people involved in film that wouldn't otherwise be made, making film. And we also made a Video Diary series, of slots, of 3-minute slots, which was again very good fun, and video diaries obviously are a kind of part of the evolving community media movement in a way. So I did a lot of that stuff. But I also needed to earn a living as well as doing these productions.

Teaching the MA course in Documentary at Goldsmiths, University of London

...I ended up teaching the MA in Documentary here, and I've done lots of other teaching as well, but this became my main job. In a sense I think my interest in teaching has been the same as in any community media thing, of like being able to work with people to nurture their creativity and help them produce stuff. So it doesn't feel like a very different activity, it feels similar in lots of ways, but very institutionally supported, and having a salary attached to it, which is always nice.

I think the main connection is really about ethics and about politics and ethics of representation...one of the key issues, and this is always a topic of conversation on the MA, is how do you work with people in a way that's enabling, not exploitative, in partnership, those kinds of issues...that comes very much out of my community video background I think. And those are always issues under discussion on the MA. And different filmmakers approach them differently, and some people work more participatively than others, but that's always an issue that was under discussion.