

Lorraine Leeson
Edited LCVA interview
Interviewer: Siobhan Schwartzberg

Art Conferring Power

Portrait of Lorraine Leeson
Practitioner and Lecturer in Community Arts
Lives and Works in East London

My name is Lorraine Leeson. I'm an artist I grew up in the ribbon suburbs of West London. And as soon as I went to East London in my twenties I felt that I'd come home. I studied fine art. In my studies I was studying photography, film and video in a fine art department which didn't have a technician so it made me very inventive. I think I assumed that I could do anything. So as a fine artist and as a student I wanted to find a way to use my work to make a difference. I didn't want to do what I saw some of the other artists doing which was sort of making work for galleries, making work for the art market. I wanted to find a way that my work made sense for ordinary people and could help create social change. So I studied at Reading University. First of all St. Martin's School of Art which was probably the best educational year of my life. That was a foundation. Four years at Reading University and then a year in Berlin at the Hochschule der Künste. I had started to work in photography, film and video, partly because I didn't fit anywhere else and there was a tutor Ron Hamilton who sort of took students under his wing who didn't fit into all the traditional media. And it was fantastic. I never looked back. So that's when I started really with experimental film, structural film.

My First Use of Video

I met my ex-partner Peter Dunne Reading. In the year in Berlin we started working together. He was studying at the Slade and I was at the school in Berlin. We did a piece about the framing of art within institutions and the need to break out of institutions, so that was something where we started to use video. I don't really use video very much as an undergraduate, but it made sense in terms of documentation. We did these simultaneous performances which we documented, and then we took them to one site and then we took it to another site. We built up a sort of a bank of four monitors which played all the different parts of the of the event. So that was probably the first time I sort of really started to use video.

Coming Back from Germany: Film and Video Fellowship

Coming back from Germany Peter and I got lucky enough to get a Film and Video Fellowship from the Greater London Arts Association and the remit was to work in Bethnal Green and work with different groups of the community in film and video. So we did film workshops in Bethnal Green Museum of childhood. I worked with any children who turned up, including 18 month year olds. Some of their parents would just dump the kids and leave them with us. So we did drawing on film, we also used the dolls houses for sets and did plastisene animation.

Emergency: Bethnal Green Hospital Occupation Video

I suppose most significantly for me it was just the moment when the Bethnal Green Hospital went into occupation. Peter and I had been trying to find a way to work outside of institutions and work in the sort of wider community in a way that people could relate to. We had done some work initially in image and text in libraries which we felt people didn't really understand. So when we had the opportunity to work on this health campaign it seemed like a way that we could find of working on something that had a real social value. We were asked if we would do one of our workshops in the hospital because they needed a campaign video. Well we discovered very early on that those two things don't really go together and people who are doing workshops they need to be able to fail, and they are learning. Whereas a campaign actually leads a very well-produced production and it needs to be done quickly, and so we discovered that that wasn't a process that went together very well and we had to edit out all the camera shake. And that's how we produced the video, called Emergency about the Bethnal Green Hospital. It gave us an opportunity to have to work with some patients and their experience, and the campaign committee enabled us to work in the hospital. In fact I remember one particular instance we worked with a consultant who was who was very keen for us to film an operation of the removal of a piece of colon from a patient. I'm very squeamish. So we filmed this operation and I found I wasn't at all squeamish and I didn't mind it. But when it came to look at the footage afterwards it was it was just back to square one. I could hardly watch it. And so it's very interesting the way that the experience of being in a real situation with real people sort of means that you just deal with it. Watching something on a screen is something else.

Video or Photography

Well during the Bethnal Green Hospital campaign we started to document what was happening on the marches etc. and we were doing that photographically. Then we put that together to make some posters, and we also made an exhibition that went in the hospital foyer. It's interesting that in this country on the left there is a very much a literary tradition. So if there's a campaign it's always historically been issuing broad sheets and written information. But I think we proved ourselves really in terms of the way we work with people and our commitment. So when I when that campaign finished there were members of the health workers unions and Trades Council who wanted to use the money left over to get out some more information and we sat down with them and talked about what medium that would be because it couldn't be a tape-slide, film, video, posters whatever. And so we discussed how people would see it. And one of the issues is that if it's going to be film or video then it needed people sitting in a room. Obviously there was no internet then. And we talked about tape-slide which is very much in the fore at that time and I went on to make tape-slide later.

We decided in the end not to use any of those. We decided to use, to do posters. We called them visual pamphlets because they weren't going to go on the streets but they would go in in doctors surgeries and waiting rooms. There was a bit more information. So that's what we did.

The Limitations of Video

It was always an issue where to edit it and with the Bethnal Green Video we ended up using North East London Polytechnic. I think we did it on one inch, a format that I think is almost unknown now. And then it got transferred to Umatic afterwards. But it was such a problem because we had to beg and borrow the editing facilities. So that was one issue. Another

issue is that most of the stuff was filmed on Portapaks which I'm sure you'll have information on in your archive. These were reel-to-reel video, on a square deck and quite a sizable camera and you were meant to hang the Portapak on your shoulder and hold the camera. Well, for a small person like me, that just wasn't ever going to be possible. Peter and I did it because Peter had it on his shoulder. So the technology was really quite problematic. Film was getting more out of the question because again the editing was...we'd have needed to be part of an organization and even though I was a member of the London Filmmakers Coop, it seemed in the end that photography was just much more straightforward. We set up a dark room in our cellar, we had a short life house and we could just develop our own photographs. So we moved quite quickly away from video.

The Docklands Community Poster Project

Going back to when we were working with the health workers unions on East London Health Project, out of that the Trades Council invited us to do a poster about the London Docklands. That was in 1979 when the Thatcher government came to power and they saw an opportunity of all the land on the river being the biggest bit of real estate in Europe. And that's when the docks were closing down and moving down river. But a lot of people were living in that area and there was a lot of plans for how to provide facilities that were needed. And so we set about to create a poster. And discovered that there was a lot more to be said. People were very organized in east London. It's an area where there's been a lot of migration over many years. People have had to struggle to survive and therefore they're very organized. So we were able to go around to all the different groups and ask them what sort of posters they wanted. To cut a long story short, we ended up doing photo murals, which were a large-scale billboard-size images we built ourselves (they weren't advertising billboards), which actually changed like a slow-motion animation. We learned from the East London Health Project and set up a steering group of people from Docklands who would come together and talk about the issues that needed to be communicated. We built these structures in and around the London Docklands funded by the Greater London Council who had a very radical arts policy at the time, and made up a way of doing large posters using black and white photography and photo montage, about A1 size, then we had them photographed in 18 sections, photographed in these sections in a lab on a large format camera, then had them blown up to three four-by-four sections, which together made an 18 foot by 12 foot billboard. Then these were pasted onto wood, hand-coloured because you couldn't do colour printing then, varnished, and then screwed on to this billboard -18 panels making an 18 foot by 12 foot image. We had six of those in operation at any one time.

Art as a Campaigning Tool

The Docklands campaigning went through the whole of the eighties and partly we were wanting to use art as a campaigning tool, because we knew - having learned the history of art, we knew the power of art - that it's a very good tool for celebrating, consolidating, conferring power. I mean you only have to think about 18th Century portraits of landowners standing against their estate, so we thought that if art can do that for those people, then we want to use art to confirm that power onto other people.

A Change in Politics: What We Did Next

So in the 70s and 80s there were opportunities to do that in an activist way, but politics changed quite a lot. I mean it was the end of the Thatcher era and everything that came after it and politics became a lot more individualistic. At the same time we lost the funding for that project, finally because the government removed the GLC and it took them a long time to do

it. They had to remove a whole tier of governments to get rid of it because they were so popular. But after that we had to think about what to do next. The organization, the Docklands Community Poster Project did still retain some funding which had been passed over to the Regional Arts Board, the Greater London Arts Association, the equivalent of Arts Council London, but we had about half the amount that we used to have.

What I learnt from Community art

I think what I've learned is that we found a way of working with people who had greater knowledge than ourselves about issues, about certain issues, so as artists we knew how to represent those issues. That was our specialism. And it's also true to say that other artists used to say to us 'isn't it like the lowest common denominator working with a group like that because you know, if everyone's deciding on what a poster looks like', for example. Our experience was completely the opposite, because nobody was telling us what things should look like and we weren't telling them what the issues should be. But we were pooling our skills and out of that able to produce something much better than any of us could have done by ourselves. So what I knew is that it's always best to work with people for their best expertise, whether that is children who have amazing imaginations or young people who know what it's like to live in a place, or older people who want to heat their homes more cheaply.

Getting Back to Community Video

Well I didn't come back to video for a long time. In fact it wasn't until 2012. So that was about 30 years later, because I worked for a number of other media. The reason I came back to it was for a project that I'm still doing in fact, where I'm working with a group of older men called the The Geezers. I started off by asking them a question...it came out a research project, perhaps I should say, about - why wasn't the knowledge of older people going into the development of new technologies? And so I met this group in an AgeUK Centre in Bow and I asked them the question: What technology do you think would benefit yourselves or your community? What would you like to see? And at the end of the first session they all wanted to work on tidal power. So we've been doing work on renewable energy for eight years now. The first part of this project was funded through a commission at SPACE in Hackney and there was going to be an exhibition. So one thing I wanted to do was give these guys the voice of authority, because part of the project was about the fact that older people's voices are not heard. So for that I did video interviews and they were projected on a large scale in the gallery.

The Future of Community Video

I think we use the media that are at our disposal. So I think things will change as technology changes, and people will also change the technology as they need it. It was Walter Benjamin who who talked about the artist as a producer, and that actually it isn't just the content it's the means of production that is important. So I think people will use technology and media innovatively and that will change the way it's done. So I think it's not possible to predict because obviously everything's changing so rapidly with social media, I haven't used social media myself, but you know that it's obviously going to be a new area for people to explore. And I suppose also video has taken on a different role hasn't it. In the sense that you know it's something that a lot of people do (I also can't stand when its done badly), a lot of people take little snatches of video and it goes on Youtube or Vimeo or something. And so it's become the currency of the way information is disseminated and exchanged. So its impossible to say how it's how it's going to change except that it is going to change. I think

there's no question and it's changed from when I was working in the 70s because it was very straightforward then, in a way. Even though I think perhaps the experimental, although it was film, experimental film perhaps did go further than a lot of film does now. I think we move in and out of the technology, and we're going to use it to make new things happen. So I didn't know for example when I asked a question about technology to the Geezers that we were going to be doing tidal power. I thought we would be doing something with digital technology but we didn't. So we are working with engineers. So I don't know. I think it's part of art, the power of art is to work...is the unknown. I think artists work on the edge of the unknown and that's what makes it important. Because if we work within what is known we don't change anything. Nothing new happens. So you have to always be open to possibility.