

**Ron Orders**  
**Edited LCVA interview**  
**Interviewer: Ceridwen Williams**

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**"Hey! You can do this!"**

**Portrait of Ron Orders**  
**Born 1943, London (UK)**  
**Lives & works in London**  
**Founder of Cinecontact**  
**Community Video Activist**

### **Growing up**

I actually was born and grew.. I grew up until I was about five in Shepherd's Bush. I don't remember, I was born in 43 so I don't actually remember the war. I remember playing in the air-raid shelter that we had in our garden the Anderson shelter and..and my mum used to send me up the road to get eel pie and things like that. And I used to play in the street you know with kids with other kids of the street. And it was you know, it was obviously quite deprived, being after the war rationing and all of that. And I was a kid I wasn't really aware of it. So you know it was black and white I suppose. I probably remember it as black and white.

### **Education. 'Scholarship boy'**

I was from a very working class family and got a scholarship to go to a public school in Bristol. So I went there from the age of ten/eleven after the eleven plus I guess. So spent my school my kinda school years there. And I hated it. I was a fish out of water really because I was working class kid and and you know, a scholarship boy, I was quite bright and I mean I had friends I got on ok you know, I played rugby and football and I had a good time as well. But I just felt this is not for me. Strangely enough there was a Jewish house called Poleaxe and most of my friends were from Poleaxe and we used to skip off and go to jazz clubs and things like that. And they were the only ones who had were interested in music and art and film, different things. Like most kids at that time I think school was anathema. I think I had nightmares about it for at least 10 years afterwards. I don't dream about it anymore. But it was, I was just out of place really being there, and it would be very different today I think, because I think the class differences would not be as pronounced now as they were then. Then it was it was a different thing. You know they made fun of me because I had a cockney accent and or a London accent I should say. I always got in trouble too. I was the one because I was different. I think it was always assumed I was the one who got everyone else into trouble, so I was the one to get beaten. And so it was you know, yeah they beat kids in those days as-well. That's all right. I mean you know. I survived. More or less.

### **Parents professions.**

My dad when we moved to Bristol worked in Fry's chocolate factory that was that was a nice bonus every month he used to come home with a box of seconds, so I'm surprised that I don't have a chocolate habit as a result. But that was one of the bonuses. My mum worked as a cleaner in a rubber factory making rubber products and things and I used to

go and work there in the school holidays and think that was the other thing. I used to work in the school holidays. Kids don't do that anymore. You know I worked you know earned money from the age of well actually from the age from a very early age because we used to do kind of bob a job and things like that. And then I was in the Cubs. They threw me out. I got thrown out of the Cubs actually. But we did bob a job and things like that. And I was always you know it was expected I think and you know my folks didn't have much money so it was kind of necessary to go out and earn some money on weekends, school holidays things like that. And I did that all through all through school and then all through university as well.

### **Briefly studying engineering. Teaching photography.**

I went to UCL here in London to study engineering. I think I realised well I realised within weeks it was a mistake, but it wasn't that easy to shop around in those days. I wanted to switch to psychology I remember. But they wouldn't. They wouldn't let me. Universities were much less flexible then. We're talking early 60s so you were stuck with what you opted for really. And so I got into a lot of different things, photography particularly and film when I was at college. And then I taught part-time, film and photography in various colleges around London.

I'd organise photography projects so that they would go out and photograph the local community, their families you know keep a kind of photographic record of of the world around them and that sort of carried on into into what I started doing later.

### **Beginning of UK Community politics. Covent Garden**

Covent Garden is what kicked off community politics in this country. There was a plan. It's hard to believe it now but there was a plan to put a motorway ring road around Covent Garden. They were going to turn Charing Cross Road, the Strand, Shaftsbury Avenue and King's Way into motorways, into six lane motorways and Covent Garden as a result would become a kind of island surrounded by this inner ring of motorways. And so we got involved in that successful struggle against that. And I met architects students.

Architectural students from the A.A were very actively involved in that and locals, there were not many people living in Covent Garden at that time actually. Well still not. But it became a kind of cause celebre and kicked off community politics in London and across the country. And so that was a starting point I think for for for this country.

### **Liberation Films. UK Radical Film networks**

Well when I got involved with Liberation Films, we were distributors. That was our prime motivation. There was a guy called Tony Wickert who set up a group called Angry Arts and they were showing films in Kentish Town actually and when we formed Libration Films we then became distributors for a number of American films both features and documentaries. And there were I mean, there were a number of distributors around at that time Contemporary Films, Concord Films who were distributing mostly to schools, but a lot of our films were distributed by them, a lot of films around community politics, around politics in general, the women's movement. I mean that was all happening at the same time. My wife, my girlfriend at the time, was very actively involved in the first women's group which started in Tufnel Park and then in our house in Belsize Park. So it was at all tied in together really.

The big turning point was a meeting at the International Film School in Cheltenham Street in which is still there in Covent Garden, also active of course in the in the struggle to save

Covent Garden at that time and at that meeting filmmakers, radical filmmakers from all over the country, but mostly London, gathered and they were everything from The Other Cinema which was just starting and Liberation Films that was just starting. Cinema Action. Lucia Films, Marc Karlin from Lucia Films. The only ones I remember from outside London were Amber who were very active and still active in Newcastle. So all of those filmmakers got together at that conference and that I mean I was then, I was on the fringes at that time but started working then with The Other Cinema. So I was working with them for about I don't know six months or so trying to find and set up a cinema that we could operate from. Boy has that changed. I mean you know London now which is full of independent cinemas, at that time it was incredibly difficult to do something new like that. And showing radical films obviously and so from there Tony Wickert had already started Liberation Films, so he sort of poached me from The Other Cinema actually wanted my wife primarily, who was also The Other Cinema, but she had a family to bring up so I ended up going to work with him. And then I was with Liberation Films for the whole of the Seventies pretty much.

## **Distribution**

We were importing films from the States and distributing them and they were going out to schools, women's groups, community groups, eventually, not at the beginning I don't think there were much in which you would call community groups but things were starting to happen. Community festivals were just starting to happen. Triggered a lot of it with support from the Greater London Arts Association. And there was a guy called Keith Griffiths who was getting out money for film projects and funded a number of things that we did. We were also getting money from the Arts Council to make community films, community arts films. And so there were there were lots of different strands that were community based or political groups that were feeding into each other like the women's movement for example and radical groups, the anti Vietnam protest, a lot of different groups that had started in the late sixties and were very active by the early to mid 70s.

Very often we'd be called in to into an area through someone that we met. A social worker, community worker, and there were community workers you know paid for by the local council who were who were starting then to get interested not just in social issues but in community arts issues and community politics, and through them, someone like that or an activist we would get drawn into a community and we would arrange to have a film show. We had to put posters up around the area and invite people to the film show and then have a discussion afterwards and often we would show films about a community in America and their struggle to create a playground for example and they would be triggered by that. And we actually did start making a series of what we call trigger films that were just there to to trigger discussion and action and I mean discussion alone obviously is not enough. But to get people involved and engaged and doing something. So yeah they were I mean people were excited and on the whole I mean we're talking about a minority obviously. And what changed everything was when portable video was introduced.

## **Pioneers of portable cameras. AKAI**

Akai first of all brought out a quarter inch tape recorder reel to reel and then Sony brought out a half inch tape recorder and we start using that. I guess we were certainly among the first people to use it and and we were using it not just to film our own things but actually we realised that if we go to a community and say 'hey you know you can do this' you know pick up a camera. And anyone interested, we would train them and they would go out with our guidance around an issue. In their own community in their own workplace and encouraging them to use the camera and then to use the end-product to change things.

## **Starting To Happen (1974)**

We got we got some funding a small amount of funding from the Greater London Arts Association to make to work on three projects in three communities. One was Poplar, one was Balham, and the other one I think was Greenwich. And we set up projects in those three areas. What we did initially was to have a film show run a film show in a local hall and we would go around telling people that we were running a film show, put up posters and a part of that was that we would be using that opportunity to encourage people to make films about their own community themselves.

We would ask what are the issues that concern you here. And one of the issues that came up was around the the demand for a pedestrian crossing on a busy road in Bedford Hill in Balham, I believe a kid might have been hurt. I'm not entirely sure about that. I know that certainly during the filming there was a dramatic moment when a car tries to force his way through the the women and they start beating on the car to say get back. We were blocking the road because that was direct action was what was needed, and direct action actually meant blocking the road. And so the local mothers primarily got out there with their placards and banners that they then made with their kids. And I don't think there were many men around and by this time we'd trained some of the local people to use cameras themselves and to record interviews themselves.

There were interviews done with the with the local police and they were very you know very supportive. And eventually we got the material put that together into a film and organised another film show. And a lot more people came. Hundreds of people came actually. And because a lot of people had seen this film making going on and gone on for several weeks and the local people really the local people had filmed it and edited it and then presented it. So they presented this video that they'd made and other people then got engaged. And so the local councillors were invited and were affected by it. And as a result the pedestrian crossing did indeed get made there. It was a small thing, but for them for those mothers it was it was important.

We presented it on BBC and had a discussion afterwards about it I remember. So that then became a I think a trigger for a lot of community groups because it got seen, got widely seen obviously and widely shown. We were distributing it ourselves. It was a 16 mil 50 minute film. So it was a proper film and which was quite something for us at that time and that got shown yeah all over the country and I imagine was responsible for many similar projects springing up all over the country because people were inspired to think: 'Oh wow you know those women in Balham can do it then we can do it too'.

## **Fly a Flag for Poplar (1974)**

The project in Poplar was around a community festival. It must have been one of the first community festivals. Again they were supported by GLAA the Greater London Arts Association, who were putting money into, not huge amounts of money, but enough for people to to stage festivals and they put on a particularly lively event in Poplar. We filmed that, we had a photography exhibition or a huge photography exhibition. I remember teaching young kids how to take photographs, they went around and photographed all the people of their community, in their homes and outside their homes. And we had a big exhibition in the local school. So that was hand in hand with the festival.

And so that film got widely shown. And I think was quite inspiring and probably did get,

certainly inspired a lot of other people to run community festivals that then were a big thing happening all over the country. They started to become a big thing and people realised they could do it themselves, a big festival in Hackney for example. I mean when people see that they can actually take power into their own hands I mean it's a very very very moving thing and a very inspiring thing. And you know people realise hey I can do that as I say' it could be anything. They could write a book. They can write a poem. They can sing a song, and then they would do all of those things. And I remember filming all kinds of projects, and a lot of it was happening in the East End of London. Ironically I don't know why at that time it was a purely working class area. Hackney, Poplar and it was before the gentrification of the East End. So all of the projects that we were involved in were around working class communities. I come from a working class background so it was it was perfectly natural for me to be doing that. And there were a lot of other groups then started started up in the 70s doing all kinds of different things.

### **A coup at Liberation**

Caroline and I Caroline Goldie who now lives in Berlin and I went to Afghanistan with someone from the German crew to make a film about the Goethe Institute in Afghanistan. When we got back there had been a coup in Liberation Films and we, Caroline and I, discovered that then actually we'd been replaced and were not welcomed back into the group. And so that was a real split between us, and there was a very active doctor and his wife Jeff Richmond and Marie Richmond they're both dead now. And they had caused that split because we were off having fun in Afghanistan. Just before the Russians came in, while we were there teachers were being murdered. I mean it was just that was again we just got out of Afghanistan as the Russians came in. So that this, like the doors were closing behind us.

Liberation Films then limped along without us for a short time and then fell apart, because there were more splits, the people they'd got in to replace Caroline and I they caused more rifts. And so it lasted a few more years and then collapsed.

### **Cinecontact**

When I left Liberation Films or when I got kicked out of Liberation Films it was great, it was actually a good thing. I formed a company. I decided that one collective in a lifetime was enough for me and I set up a company called Cinecontact, which as the name implies was intended to be a focus for other filmmakers to draw other filmmakers and activists in, which it did and has done ever since.

### **Channel 4**

The people commissioning films at Channel 4 came out of different fields. The whole point was not to have BBC-type commissioning editors or ITV-type commissioning editors. In the beginning Channel 4 was incredibly radical, so it was a fantastic opportunity for us to get paid to make films and we became professional. Becoming professional it's not always necessarily a good thing. We became more more like them I suppose, so we changed as filmmakers too.

### **Reflection on later work & relevance of early work**

I guess in the films that I had made and I've made films since then and they've been art films, I've made political films in war zones. I've made films about ...I did a series about

lover's crossed, in love, falling in love across borders, across the Berlin Wall was the first one and then we made a series in Belfast, in Jerusalem, in Berlin and in South Africa in Johannesburg. About falling in love across across barriers. I always was interested in people's own stories and letting them tell their own stories.

The work that people were doing back then there's got repercussions that you know, film goes on forever. And I think that those films are being shown and will always be shown and I think they they have an impact they probably have an impact on the little videos that some people are filming.

And as a result I believe Snapchat is going to be launched on the American market for 49 billion dollars I was reading today so from Liberation Films to Snapchat you know, that was, there must be some progression in there.