

Carol Stevens
Edited LCVA interview
Interviewer: Zoe Kinross

"We were part of it we weren't observing"

Portrait of Carol Stevens
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Lives and works in Bristol
Lecturer at U.W.E
Filmmaker & Community Video Activist

Growing up and education.

I grew up in the suburbs of Bristol till I was about eleven. And then my dad got moved with his job to the New Forest. So I was quite keen on ponies so moving to the New Forest was you know like a dream come true. I was a teenager in the countryside. And it was really lovely, I loved all the kind of open space and the riding. But then there became a point where I'd start to think there's got to be more to life than this.

I left school when I was 16 and went to work in an equestrian centre, because I was still so keen on horse riding, and yeah after about a year I kind of.. like the horses were so well looked after and being a groom was really you know very very hard work and very little pay.

So I then I actually went and retook some O Levels and an A Level. And then once I got those qualifications I went to art school and I went to Wimbledon to do my Foundation and then I went to Falmouth, because at that point Falmouth was one of the few art colleges where you didn't actually have to specialize, so although I was drawing and painting and printmaking, if you wanted to do some sculpture you could or if you wanted to work on Super8 film you could. So there was a kind of freedom you know, you could work on different mediums and that was great.

Moving back to London. Oval Video.

I worked with somebody on a Super 8 film at Falmouth. But I didn't really get into filmmaking until I moved back up to London in the early 1980s. I was in a women's theatre group at that point and we were rehearsing at Oval House and Oval house had a community video unit there, and I got to know John Dovey and Nick Fry. And then I had an opportunity to work there and I think I saw it as a way of.. I think it was sort of politics that got me interested in the first place in community video and suddenly you know cameras were much more lightweight. They were accessible and yet just seemed like it was an opportunity for people to make films and have their own voice, because at that time until Channel 4 evolved, television was very kind of conservative and conventional.

Women working in film and video

Even when I was at college I would never have thought I could have worked in film and video because it felt like it was a really closed shop and it had been. I remember seeing a woman at The Oval House and she was filming the show in Oval House theatre. And it was just really liberating. I just thought: oh my goodness, there's a camerawoman and I'd

really like to do that.

I think initially it felt like there wasn't even an opportunity or an open door for that to happen. But when I saw this woman operating a camera I just thought: yes, this is great. I want to do this. And also sort of train other women so once I'd train myself to feel that if I trained other women then they could also operate cameras and do technical work.

The KY2000 Colour Camera. Greenham Common.

As soon as I started at Oval Video I took one of their huge, I think they were called the KY2000 big orange box cameras and you had this almost like this really big umbilical cord then to this huge heavy porta what they called the porta well, basically it's where you put the tapes in. I went up with two other women and we camped up at Greenham Common and we just got very involved, I mean it was amazing kind to be there as part of the protest but also filming and interviewing and getting in through the fence.

It was really important that we showed that we were a part of them and we believed in the protest. I remember when I listened back to my voice as I was operating, kind of singing along or you know shouting out like 'you can't do that or let her go' because there was kind of quite a lot of aggression with the police there. So I remember sort of sitting down on the road blocking lorries coming, you know with a camera, and I think something about having a camera there makes, although you were obviously a little bit detached you know because you're sort of seeing it all through through a lens. But yeah I definitely felt like we were part of it, we weren't there sort of observing.

Authorship

Community video is about the fact that you're working with a group of people who take authorship of the content. I have worked on programs where you know the camera crew will come in and somebody will be telling their story, but they're not involved in the editing process so for me community video was very much about working with people finding out what their concerns were what they wanted to say about it. Training them how to use the equipment and for them to have authorship in the editing process, this kind of autonomy. But it wasn't without its problems I think working where everyone has a say in how something should be cut is, well, it's very time consuming.

Albany Video

Karen Alexander was already working at Albany video when I joined and my job was to specifically work with women and young women's groups in the area. And when I joined Karen was already in production with a group of women working in manual trades.

Rough with the Smooth

In the early 80s there were women who hadn't worked in manual trades before but there was funding and sort of apprenticeship schemes for women to learn trades. And in fact there's still one that exists in Bristol actually, as you go up out of Totterdown there's a really lovely sign called the Women's Workshop and it's still in existence. I think it's being under threat at the moment. But yeah in the 80s there were women learning trades and this program was was really just sort of showing what trades they were learning and what it was like getting jobs working as part of the council, but working predominantly with men and how they were kind of fighting their corner, or you know just working in jobs that were

traditionally very much a male domain.

Second Wave

Second Wave was a sort of young woman's youth group based at Albany Video and lots of local young women used to attend and they'd run the workshops and they would devise shows. And one of them I remember was called Net Full of Holes.

And that was about almost like the housing crisis. I mean it seems really strange talking about a housing crisis then when you think of what it's like now, but there were lots of women sort of slipping through the net in terms of benefits or getting council housing and they made a show. Yes. And it's called Net Full of Holes.

MsTaken Identity (1985)

Second Wave were also involved in MsTaken Identity, which was a Channel 4 production looking at different women's groups all over London and they all contributed to to this film.

There was a women's crew that were involved in making that, and then there were some women's workshops where they made... Sankofa for example they'd made a really beautiful short piece on Super8 of young black women getting ready, making up and doing their hair and that got included. But then as a crew we kind of went out and set up scenarios in different parts of London and went and filmed the women. But it felt like they had their autonomy with their pieces that they were contributing to this Channel 4 film. I think that worked well, it had a really good energy to it. And it had a kind of a mix of formats as well as it being broadcast standard. Yeah I think for me, I think sometimes the broadcast standard thing used to get in the way a little bit, because you'd want it to look good and sound good. Sometimes I think it's become a little bit too much of a replica of what was predominantly you know on the BBC at the time.

Distribution was quite difficult. And we did set up Albany Video distribution which really helped but at that time it was just putting up a screen in a community hall or centre which was great. But you know you would only do it a few times for people to come and see. So distribution was difficult and that's why when Channel 4 said that they would take us on, they would fund us, it just opened up to a much much bigger audience.

Channel 4 Franchise

When Channel 4 franchised our workshop which was great and it meant that we could make programs that would be screened on Channel 4. I don't think they ever really quite got how long it took to make a program with a community group. Sometimes it would take up to about a year, and I think although they really liked what we produced, and they thought the content was good, they couldn't quite understand why it took so long to make.

It was always very content driven which was important and we wanted to make sure there was positive representation of people, and that was really key. I think some of the difficulties for me were the fact that it was content driven, but sometimes technically things weren't as good as they could be. Like sound got overlooked quite a lot of the time, so you might have had somebody being very natural on camera and saying something quite amazing but maybe technically it just wasn't as good as what it could have been. So sometimes that felt a little bit frustrating, and also the fact that when so many people have their say in a production it doesn't necessarily carry one voice. And also I think at that time we you know, like our reference points were television and television had been very

conventional. So you know talking heads and cutaways and and I think because we were, or I was, still certainly learning I was kind of following that form.

15:28: Process & Product

I think process is extremely important and its key, its not until you start a process that you begin to discover things and find things out, and see what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes there can be the sort of emphasis on the final product or in your mind's eye you've got an idea of what the final product's going to be, but through the process of exploration and trying things out it can sort of take quite a different direction.

I think we were probably quite forgiving in terms of whether things were done technically well, as long as the content was there. As long as there was a good interview or people were happy with how they were represented, we were more forgiving about whether or not you could see them that well or whether the sound was breaking up, or the sound recording was was quite low. I think it was like that initially. But then when we had Channel 4 funding then there was more pressure. It was broadcast standards, so not only did you have the really good content, but you could hear what was being said and people were...you thought about the kind of composition and the lighting.

I think the people involved appreciated that kind of level of standard in quality when they saw the films, because people wanted to make it look like television anyway. It's just that there weren't any sort of short cuts to doing it like that.

Moving on from Albany Video

I worked at the Albany from I think it was about 1982 to 87. I think I was getting to a point where I just wanted to have some time for me to learn and train, and I'd become much more interested in lighting camera work and probably felt at the time I couldn't necessarily follow that through with the Albany. And then this opportunity came up at film school which had European social funding and it was a course for women and I applied. And I got it. I think that was me kind of moving on thinking about it was I wanted to do. And it sort of makes sense like having gone to art school and always being interested in pictures that I should find that or follow that through to doing lighting camera work.

Influences & a change in aesthetic

When I saw what Isaac Julian was doing and what Black Film and Audio Video Collective were doing. They were just playing with the form a lot more. And I felt that was really exciting and got me wanting to think much more about the aesthetic of film. The content was still important but it was really wanting to kind of find the right visual style and the aesthetic. I think I'd been a little bit conservative about that, you know it was more about what people were wanting to say and how they were being represented. But it didn't really have my voice in it, which was always a little bit a kind of a struggle. But not at the beginning cos at the beginning it was like this oh wow this equipment you know you can go to all different places and film people and you get really good interviews. But I guess we were kind of finding our way with it.

Continuity & present work

I teach at the University of the West of England and I teach part time on the graphic design course and I work with students making moving image work and I really like their

approach. They have you know because they're not training in sort of television or film production they sort of come with kind of quite a open mind and an experimental approach. And I think from the Albany days I've always carried on teaching you know wanting to. I guess Albany was much more about vocational training whereas now it's more about education. That's something that I've always always done is teach. And in terms of my own work I make short films and my interests are in place and memory.

21:38: Reflections on early work

I think we all worked really well at Albany Video together. You know we all had really sort of similar ethos and we were very supportive of each other.

I think it's really important that this archive's happening and that people can see what work was made then, and have an understanding of what was happening politically and culturally at that time. Because it was definitely the start of something. I mean everybody can now take pictures with their phone, and you know document their lives all the time. But in the 80s it felt like it was the first time, or the late 70s /80s, where you were taking cameras out into places and talking to people that would never have had that kind of exposure. So I think it's really important to see and understand the context.