

Song of Long Ago

Portrait of John "Hoppy" Hopkins
Born 1937 in Slough
Lives and Works in London
TVX and co-founder of Fantasy Factory

On my graduation day my godfather gave me a little camera, an Agfa Silette.
That's how I learned to see

I studied physics, math,
crystallography and metallurgy.
When I came to London I was aged about 23

In the beginning I didn't have a goal in mind.
But when I arrived in London in 1960 I eventually became a photographer

The creative energy started to bud, like new growth on a tree. And so there was this flowering in the first part of the 60s, when all this stuff was breaking out like jazz and poetry, people hadn't really experienced that before...one of them was an event called the International Poetry Reading, or something like that, at the Albert Hall. And I was the press photographer for that event. And so I got into that quite deeply. But that turned out to be one of the focal or pivotal events in the burgeoning of underground culture as we called it then.

The rise of International Times- an underground magazine (01:37)

It was natural, after the Albert Hall, to see what else could be done, and it turned out that this eventually gave rise to the International Times. I got involved because I just found myself among the milieu where there were lots of people doing art in the widest sense. It seemed like good fun, entertaining, novelty, all the things that make life interesting. We thought we would take a chance and we identified that a fortnightly paper would be very useful for the culture. My background was as a photographer, and my foreground was Notting Hill, and the other participants in the founding of the paper, Barry Miles ran the Indica Gallery and the Indica Bookshop in the West End; Jim Haynes and Jack Moore ran the old Arts Lab, Peter Stansill was a roving journalist, Charles Marowitz was a playwright actually, and Jack Henry Moore was the other person who had video. So Jack Moore was a very important influence in what was going on in video, because I had the first Portapak, and he had the second.

February 1969: A friend mentioned video to me (03:26)

I was co-organizing a culture festival, actually a carnival, in the snow in a little town called Rieti, in the middle of Italy. And one of my friends there, called Jim Haynes, mentioned video to me in the course of conversation. And immediately he said, I knew what it was. I knew that it had been waiting for me. Or I'd been waiting for it. Well it's like a living thing. You get immediate feedback. It completely by-passed all the interesting things that you can

do with film, like setting f-stops and minutely adjusting focus and all that sort of stuff.

With a little help from Sony (04:22)

I went to Sony and I asked them if I could borrow one of these new instruments. And they said yes, and so I came back from Sony in England with a 405-line Portapak, open reel. I showed to lots of people who were, everybody was amazed. Because there's something stronger than tactile, I don't know what the word for it is, but it's like part of the element of a living creature. I shot everything I could. And the playback was particularly important. Because I found out very quickly you could learn; you could improve your own technique by paying attention to what you'd done. For instance, you have to learn to hold the camera steady. In the beginning you have to do that not by instinct but by determination. It was a change of language and a change of culture, that this little thing started to generate. I mean, look around nowadays, everyone's got one, it's become as universal as the telephone.

When people see themselves (05:50)

Editing had to be done in the camera as you shot. So without postproduction you're really limited to what you can do using video more as process rather than product. But there was plenty of interest. The first thing when people see themselves is, they're fascinated by the idea, it's me, it's a reflection of me, which has nothing to do with the aesthetics of it, it's on a deep personal level. Later on when you become more experienced you can discount some of that personal stuff, and be more objective.

Do anything you want (06:36)

Video had a sort of magnetic effect on anybody who came into contact with it. So quickly around the Portapak which I borrowed from Sony there appeared people who were interested in it. It was clear that this attractive process would go on for sometime, in fact it went on for many years. The nice thing about it was that people would do whatever they thought of – artists, sculptors, pornographers, documentary makers, filmmakers experimenting with a new medium. Anything you can think of – social work, community work, media, radio, TV, which came later. I really enjoyed being a cameraman with video. It was personally close to my heart. But it turns out there's a lot of other things in the early stages of a medium which it's possible to do on a social level and that also is very interesting. The idea of community video, whatever that is, is another way of generating interest.

The London New Arts Laboratory and TVX (07:56)

I was one of this group of artists, we needed a place of work and managed to persuade Camden Council to let us have the use of the building for a couple of years before it was due to be demolished. I had a space for the video and I worked under the name TVX, and TVX became what you call a brand nowadays. That was our working title. So TVX was founded at the London New Arts Lab.

A video intervention at the BBC (08:34)

Well we did lots and lots of things. There was a police raid on the New Arts Lab. I think they were looking for drugs, but they didn't find any. But they didn't know that we were recording video while this was going on. When they left we looked in to see what we'd got recorded on video, and it didn't work at all well with these low-light levels so we decided to

do a bit of theatre and simulate what had just happened, which was people up against the wall, and police patting you down. So then we recorded that and then one of us knew somebody at the BBC, and it was in the mid-evening and phoned up and said hey we've got some video of the police doing a raid. What? You'd better come over. So we piled into my Mini car and went over to the BBC in White City.

Because it was a non-standard format we had to take the playback deck and the Portapack and the power supply with us. And we got them into a small studio at the BBC, and pointed a broadcast camera at the portable screen, and that made a few seconds of broadcast on the same night. We were really very pleased because it showed that despite all the technical difficulties which the ACTT union put in the way, it was possible to do something and get it broadcast if it was interesting enough. So that was a first, although it was very modest.

Community action in Notting Hill (10:43)

I remember videoing a demonstration of, probably about housing, and there was a police bus going slowly along the street. And leaning against it, trying to push it backwards, was a whole group of people. And this made a nice little cameo of people pushing the police bus. So that was community politics. And I think on the same occasion there was street theatre. Street theatre is very good on video, because the style of theatre is melodramatic over-acting to make people laugh, and make points in a certain sort of way, and it's beautifully suited to doing it the street. Because you had the spontaneity of the people crowding round to see what's happening, and the loud voices of the actors, and it's genuinely good fun.

Video in community development (11:59)

In 1971 we were commissioned via the University of Southampton to do some research work for the Home Office about video in community development. There was a small amount of money available but it was enough for me to go to New York and to Montreal, collecting information. In New York from independent video makers, and from Montreal the Challenge for Change project, run by the National Film Board of Canada. I picked up a lot of ideas, both artistic and social, from that visit, which later we wrote up, and became a standard work, called 'Video in Community Development'.

The idea of how to use video or film to help people develop their own communities, and it's quite a difficult puzzle to work out how to do it without parachuting in from somewhere up there an advisor to say this is how you must do it. It has to be done on a more interactive level, and I think that was the meta-message that I heard, particularly from the National Film Board of Canada, and also from George Stoney, who worked in New England somewhere.

Fantasy Factory A video resource run in partnership with Sue Hall (13:37)

The first phase was from 1969 to 1973 and the second phase when Sue came to join me and we worked under the name Fantasy Factory, really occupied the rest of the decade, as we tried to build up a video resource that lots of different people could use. Then from 1980 onwards Fantasy Factory was a provider of post-production to the non-profit sector, in a word.

The interesting thing was that it was a network without boundaries. So someone could come along one day who was an artist, and refer to our library, and the next day they could come along as a community worker. People were not tied to fixed roles, and this is quite important because that leads to cross-fertilization between activities, between disciplines,

between ways of working.

How to use general systems theory to run a video resource (14:48)

The most interesting thing from my point of view was, with Sue Hall and a friend called John Steel from California, we were developing theories of how systems work. I need to give you a bit of theoretical background, not very much. Shannon and Weaver, who were two cyberneticians and electronic engineers in the 1950s, worked out an approach for dealing with electronic systems, into 3 levels – A, B and C. Level A is the technical level, which is, you can imagine a man with a soldiering iron trying to repair a joint; Level B is the aesthetic level, you can imagine an artist trying to create a work of aesthetic value; and then level C is the place where you look for an outcome which shows a change in the world as a whole.

Video as evidence in magistrates' courts in the UK (16:26)

This was an achievement on Level C. A small achievement perhaps, but it was significant because it affected a larger number of people. I think the establishment of more coherent funding would be another example of a change in society, as a whole.

The Association of Video Workers (16:54)

We were having problems with funding, mainly from the arts sector, but also the community sector. We started the Association of Video Workers which lasted for, as I recall, for about a year in order to put video funding on the arts map. And I think it was successful because Thatcher hadn't got into power yet, and the natural expansion of the field of video work was happening in a...almost mathematically calculable form, you could see it growing year on year.

We had a very hard time explaining to the funding bodies how it was possible to have a community of interest which was not tied necessarily to a local community. Of course nowadays with the World Wide Web you can have a community of interest which covers the whole planet. In those days it was very hard convincing the Arts Council that under their Community Arts programme you could find a community of interest in Greater London. How times have changed!

Technical Interventions (18:22)

In the 1970s we had to get into the technical side of low-gauge video, and develop some pieces of equipment which would have a fairly short lifetime, because of the rapid development of technology. The things that we personally invented which were useful at the time were an editing system called Trigger Happy, which was done in conjunction with the engineer Richard Monkhouse, who was also a video artist.

Video is a very capital intensive technology because it keeps changing and up-grading itself. Every year or two there's another advance. And if you're trying to use the technology you have to keep on buying new machines and re-investing, and the only way to do that is to earn your money from production facilities, to feed into this hungry beast called developing technology, which will eat up as much money as you can find, in every direction.

A rescue from oblivion (19:58)
To digitise and archive our heritage

Yes it's worthwhile because the analogue video degenerates in the course of time, and some of those tapes are now 50 years old, or very nearly...45 years. And it's still possible to save the signal, in order to digitize it.

The first objective would be to rescue from oblivion the recordings that we've got. The second objective would be, having digitized the material; it's like getting to the starting line. Seen through the eyes of an anthropologist, there are many different things that can be extracted, which we weren't really aware of at the time. Destroy or neglect that information could be a serious cultural loss, which is irreplaceable.

Epilogue (21:26)
Song of long ago

Another programme that we made, which was called Song of Long Ago, made with people who were, who then were the age that I am now, I'm 75. And I won't live much longer. And all the people who were in the original Song of Long Ago, they've all died, because that's what happens when you get to the end of your life. It would be a pity if what they leave behind couldn't be preserved, because in future generations we may want to come back and look again...If I've done anything that's worthwhile that could be preserved so they could be used by other people for some advantage, I'd be in favour of that. What's left after you've gone? I think that, personally, I think that donating my brain to one of the brain banks would be a useful thing to do, because there's quite a demand for brains - used brains - in the neurophysiological circles. I'm particularly interested in that because I suffer from Parkinson's disease and I would like to provide whatever I can to help people solve the question of how can we cope with this in a more permanent way, so that people would not suffer from it.